

# COMMUNICATING: THE HEART OF LITERACY

A public dialogue about communication,  
literacy, enablement, collaboration, and relational trust



# Acknowledgements

This publication captures something of the way Tasmanians think about communication, language, literacy and collaboration. Gathered together *en masse*, the impact of such a multitude of wisdoms is heightened. It creates a new experience of meaning shared. A necessary condition for a problem halved.

This collection was produced to disseminate viewpoints and insights that were prepared for the 2018 *Communicating: The Heart of Literacy* symposium hosted by Her Excellency Professor the Honourable Kate Warner AC, Governor of Tasmania at Tasmania's Government House.

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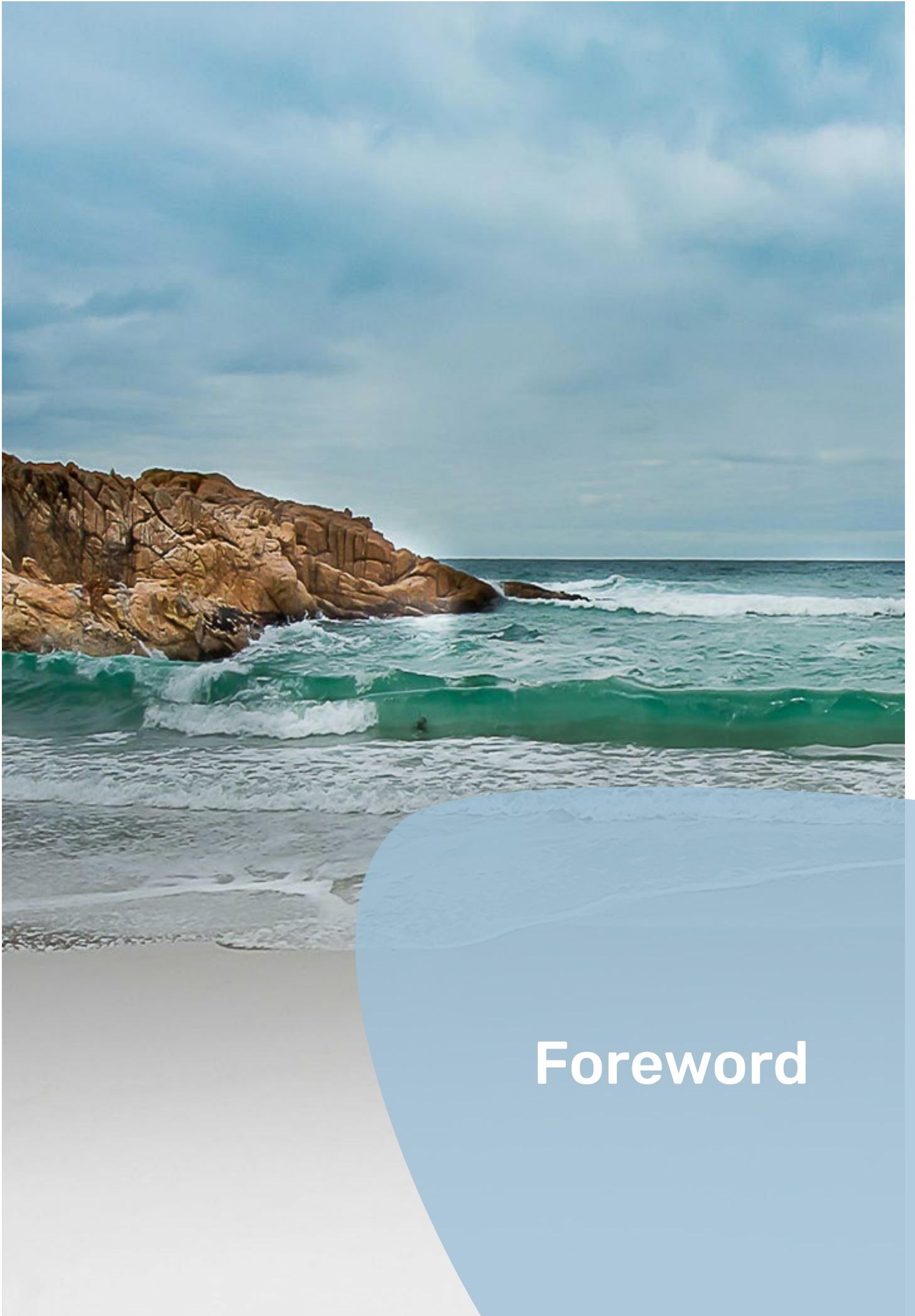
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# Foreword



# Communicating: The Heart of Literacy

## An all-day symposium at Government House

—  
FOREWORD BY HER EXCELLENCY PROFESSOR THE HONOURABLE  
KATE WARNER AC, GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA

In mid-2017 Rosalie Martin, founder of Chatter Matters Tasmania – of which I am Patron – approached me with a proposal to host an all-day symposium at Government House, the principal objective being to explore the positive powers and liberating possibilities of communication. She wrote: ‘As you know, communication, language and literacy affect every area of life: health and wellness, education, justice, restoration and repair, relationship, employment, violence and calm, tenacity and the richness of the potential of human agency.’

The proposal had been initiated by the board members of Chatter Matters, who expressed interest in an event which might illuminate the value of cross-agency integration of its reparative and transformational work.

I readily agreed, given that improving Tasmanian literacy standards is central to my work as Governor and complements my position as Chair of the Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment’s Advisory Committee. It also seems to me that Government House, as an establishment that is representative of all Tasmanians irrespective of background, education or status in the community, is an ideal location to undertake a collaborative problem-solving event of this nature.

This in turn led to requests being made of a diverse range of stakeholders to contribute opinion pieces to a public conversation ahead of the symposium. The 80 opinion pieces (highly readable and absorbable at around 600 to 800

words in length) are tremendously varied in their authorship, content and style. There are psychologists, criminologists, criminal lawyers, magistrates, social workers, a paediatrician, a physiotherapist, a prisoner, an economist, refugees, professionals and community leaders from a variety of fields who have overcome communication or literacy obstacles, parents who have struggled with their children's literacy problems, and authors sharing the joy of reading and the power of literacy. And there are, as one would expect, educators sharing their insights from research and practice.

Despite this diversity in authorship, there is a commonality of themes: literacy, illiteracy and collaboration. It is an engaging and inspiring collection.

My background as an academic criminal lawyer and criminologist means that I am aware of the effect family violence can have on children's literacy by reason of disruption and trauma. And I also know that literacy and communication deficits block access to justice for victims of crime and offenders, and of the law reform options to ensure better access to justice. But of course the problem is much broader than access to justice. With 48% of Tasmanians lacking written language skills at a high enough level to manage the demands of daily life, the 'wicked' literacy problem means that 48% of Tasmanians don't have access to so many aspects of life that make living so rewarding and meaningful.

These opinion pieces are an excellent start to broadening the literacy conversation and to stimulating the dialogue envisaged by Rosalie Martin. There is much to ponder in them, much that is revealing, and a great deal of material provided to work with, in order to do what we can to improve the literacy and therefore the health and wellbeing of our society. The personal stories of learning and communication difficulties from those who have overcome them, their parents, teacher or therapist are touching, inspiring and insightful.

Many of these stories resonated strongly with me personally, as with the grandmother of a grandson with dyslexia whose mother was repeatedly told 'everything is okay', he is just 'a late developer'. Together with stories of innovative programs in prisons, schools and the community that support and encourage literacy and examples of successful collaborations, they suggest that by working collectively and collaboratively it should be possible to tackle a seemingly intractable problem.

It is said that actions speak louder than words: but not always. As proof, let these few random tidbits from the opinion pieces tantalise:



My life story, and the incredible village of people in it, give testimony that when a strategy is executed to bring support and acceptance around a person, both their social and economic outcomes are seriously altered for the betterment of all in our communities.



Leo is three and he is looking up at us with big and wondering eyes as we read our story to a group of children and adults. We have learned to keep the stories we read very simple. Not too many words, even though a good many of the children at our feet or sitting on their parent's laps often follow storybooks with far more text in them. What we notice is that all the children are enjoying the story, even the babes, even the restless five-year-olds.



One of the many challenges around ensuring non-mainstream, applied learners become effectively literate is that some parents and some teachers still think that one does not need good literacy skills to do VET and see the pathway as a default choice for young people who have 'failed' the traditional curriculum, declaring with acceptance that reading and writing is not for them.



This was the turning point for Matty. At last someone had listened to his story!



The rationale, process and consequences are straightforward: first acknowledge there is a problem and give it a name rather than perpetuate a transparent sham that everything is okay. Confirm that the problem is common and well understood, countering the recurrent feelings of isolation and hopelessness. Gather a team, including child and parents, and articulate a clear, structured plan with measurable goals promoting confidence and accountability.



The simple act of picking up a book is a powerful strategy that costs very little but provides a significant return on investment ... When we read to a child, and encourage them to join us in the reading, as they are able, we greatly improve their chances of achieving higher levels of literacy and improved school readiness.



We need money spenders with vision and insight into the literacy needs of our state; we need influential leaders of the community and within governments to change the mindset of our communities.

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The courage to walk through the door comes from the staff. Their teachers have no formal teaching qualifications. In fact, for some, the literacy campaign is their first real job. But these staff hold the only qualification that counts out here: they're local; neighbours, aunties, friends who themselves have struggled with reading and writing and are learning on the job alongside the students – their mob.

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The program has proven to be very promising and has so far elicited positive results. Having a parent in prison can have a significant impact on a child's educational prospects ... In some instances, the parents themselves may struggle with literacy and it is very encouraging to see children take on the role as teacher, as they read extracts or explain maths problems to their mum or dad. Acting as 'teacher' for their incarcerated parent not only reinforces the material to the child, but also aids their confidence building, self-esteem and helps to develop strong communication skills.

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I reflect on my early years in the education system with my children; my earliest memories are of a system that almost broke me, because my children needed support and it was almost impossible for me to get it for them. I'm a pretty strong person but the system brought me to my knees. Then I think about those students who had teachers and schools that really understood their needs, and they have succeeded in gaining entry to university or an apprenticeship and are set up to succeed in life. Whether we want to face the fact or not, our education system is failing some children.

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I believe that those of us who were privileged to begin with and given the gifts of reading and writing have a duty of care in our community. There are practical things we can do, like reading a book on a bus, a visual celebration of literature and therefore literacy. We can support our bookshops, and use the wonderful libraries we have on offer all across our island, including inside Risdon Prison.

‘I don’t know why you bother with me, Steve. No one in our family can read; it’s like a magic trick we don’t know. I just can’t do it. I can’t make my brain see words.’ (Ben, 13.)



The relationship between schools and families has become very transactional and businesslike. Numerous policies and compliance issues have made it challenging for parents to contribute in traditional ways. Schools need to ‘open the doors’ to families and value their contributions. Schools need to complement the learning that has already happened in the home and recognise and value parents as the first and ongoing educators of their children.



Finally, from Rosalie Martin:

Progressing intransigent problems requires many voices and orchestration of the array of insights which they hold. Skills of careful listening, no judgment, calm, wonder, curiosity and openness create the conditions in which individuals presenting their views can be ‘seen’ and ‘heard’ in the honour of their identities and human worth. Dialogue is called for. Not adversarial responding. In his book *On Dialogue*, David Bohm writes: ‘In a dialogue, nobody is trying to win. Everybody wins if anybody wins.’ Gaining and widely sharing these communication skills ... are at the heart of Tasmania’s literacy solutions.



As Rosalie Martin has explained, we need to do the hard yards of collaborating well if we are sincere in our aim of resolving seemingly intransigent problems. Effective collaboration requires trust, mutual respect and courage.

And, as the title suggests, communication is at the heart of the symposium, which takes the form of an all-day dialogue based upon storytelling and reflection. The day concludes with time for unhurried and respectful connection afforded through a shared meal.

Rosalie Martin and her husband, Rich, as accredited facilitators of Courage & Renewal work, are well placed to ensure positive outcomes from the symposium; as is their attending colleague Dr Janet Smith, a Courage & Renewal mentor and Associate Professor of Education at the University of Canberra. I am very much looking forward to participating in this day.





01

# It Takes A Village: Authentic Literacy



# It Takes A Village: Authentic Literacy

BY ADAM & JESSI MOSTOGL

Adam Mostogl is the founder of Illuminate Education which encourages students to be innovative and entrepreneurial; he is also a former finalist for Young Australian of the Year.

Jessi Mostogl is an experienced primary school teacher now working with Illuminate Education to expand programs into primary schools for fostering creativity and innovation.

**T**here is no way you can survive in the modern world without being able to communicate, so it is critical that we encourage every person to be confident in their literacy ability.

When I reflect on how we prepare students for the working world through teaching entrepreneurship, it is critical that they can speak to each other, write to each other and communicate confidently with those around them.

For them to be able to start their own business or be an effective team member within an organisation, they must work with others, share information, interpret situations and be able to communicate effectively. Think about how many people you've talked with today, emailed or even texted; that requires confidence in literacy.

It might just be my impression, but the scariest thing is that over the eight years I've been delivering programs in schools across Australia, I believe that confidence in literacy is dropping. We push the students hard in the programs – but we know that in these situations, how the students handle this pushing

If we are to truly lift literacy levels in our community, it is the responsibility of the whole community to invest in the next generation.

depends upon their confidence in all areas. And it's becoming more and more important for us to restate core literacy skills, such as punctuation and capitalisation, amongst others, despite teaching high school students.

The notion of the need for a village to raise a child is then a useful metaphor of how society should be part of education; especially literacy: to underpin how critical this skill is for all areas of learning.

If a student is struggling with literacy, this creates a huge barrier in their ability to engage fully in other areas of learning.

Using the village metaphor, there is an image of all learning being taught for a purpose and with an authentic application. While there have been tools and programs developed over the years to guide and facilitate the development of literacy skills, the ability to see how these tools are applied in the real world is sometimes missed – meaning students struggle to see the reason why they are learning these skills.

One of the key motivations of Project Based Learning is to present students with opportunities to gather all the skills and knowledge they encounter and apply them in real-world situations. By doing this, students get to experience how different skills and knowledge interact across subject areas, rather than being focused on single subject areas. This is essential to literacy because until students can experience how valuable effective communication is in their lives, they will struggle to place value in what they are learning.

Another essential element of how a village educates youth is in the multiple influencers that the village has. Educators are continually placed under pressure to be responsible for all areas of learning – and while they have a key role to play, the responsibility is not entirely theirs. If we are to truly lift literacy levels in our community, it is the responsibility of the whole community to invest in the next generation.



In the Illuminate: Nextgen Challenge program, we know that our wider community wants to be part of the learning experience, be invited in to speak, support the creative process and judge student work. This means that students access professionals who share in their learning experiences as well as bringing knowledge and providing examples of how the target skills are applied in the working world.

These opportunities should be more regular, and those who are in our community should also see that learning can occur outside of the 9–3 school day. There are so many ways to do this, including encouraging job applicants to seek feedback, to work with employees to build their communication skills, and giving them a chance to fail but to then reflect on what could have otherwise been done.

As a final point, we should be looking at how we equip parents with skills, confidence and ideas in order to support *them* in helping children develop a love and interest in literacy. If teachers are shown skills to teach students to spell, read and speak, parents should be supported to extend this into their homes. This does not mean that the home environment becomes an extension of the classroom, but young people should be encouraged to think critically about the information being presented to them and explain their answers or thoughts when asked questions within other situations.

Therefore if we are to truly see a change in the literacy standards of our community, we need to provide students with authentic and practical opportunities to apply their classroom learning in diverse real-world situations.

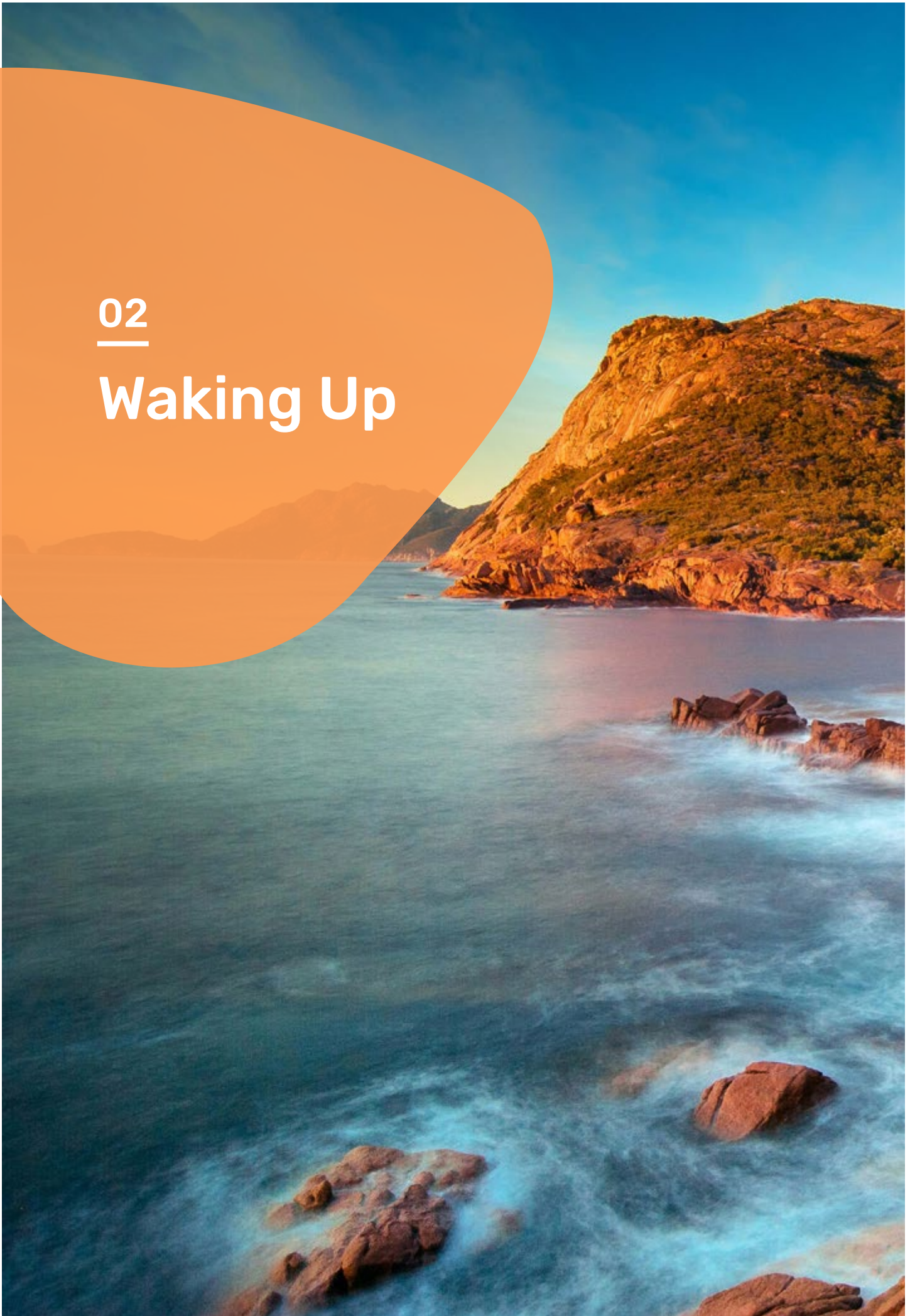
Tasmania can and needs to become the village that empowers every single individual of our next generation to be more engaged than the generation before.



*Something to think about: In the idea of education across a village, what role can you play in encouraging a range of people to be more confident in their literacy? How can you leverage your existing relationships and trust to encourage others to grow in their skills and capacity?*

02

# Waking Up



# Waking Up

BY AIDAN (NOT HIS REAL NAME)

Aidan learned to read and write in adulthood.

I started at a special school at eight. It was a school for slow learners.

I used to and still get confused with reading. And paper-work is still hard for me to do. That's why I am not worried about asking for help from others. It's a lot better doing it that way – [asking for help] – than me doing [the paperwork] and stuffing it up. That just makes some people more upset that I didn't ask for help in the first place. That's why I just ask. That way they don't get upset and say 'why didn't you just say you didn't know or understand the paperwork?'

I used to get frustrated when they would say 'do your best with it'. How can you, when you don't know half the words? You can't fill out the paperwork if you don't know what it means!

I get a lot of people who give me looks, but I don't worry about it. If they want to be like that, I don't worry about what they're thinking about me. They're the ones that need to grow up and understand that we are not all the same.

Some are good at what they do and some others find it hard to do the same thing. I know I'm not the best at doing some things, but why should I let them get to me? I know I am still as good as them but just can't do the same work as them.

I have been put down all my life. It's hard being different. But there's a lot about like me.

I get a lot of people who give me looks, but I don't worry about it. If they want to be like that, I don't worry about what they're thinking about me. They're the ones that need to grow up and understand that we are not all the same.

I think a lot about life's ups and downs. Nobody knows what life is like. Life is what you make it. I think life is bad the way others just think it's okay to put others down and bully them. Just because you are different. You are still beautiful inside. People need to think how they would like it if I said things about them.

I am getting help with my reading and writing. Others might put me down, but I know I am the bigger man. Because I am getting help.

I am starting to understand it now. The more work I do, the better I get. I am okay at little words, but the big ones I still get stuck on. It shows that doing it the right way, not the wrong way, helps. I still can't spell a lot of words, but who can?

I am going to set my mind to finding a way to keep up this work I am doing! I wouldn't have done this writing before. I didn't know how to. I didn't know what or how to start off.

A change in me is that I've woken up that I can do stuff I didn't think I could do. I am a lot stronger and wiser in life. I'm not worrying as much as I used to.

Life is too short to worry about silly little things.

I don't care what others think.





03

# Low Literacy and Women





# Low Literacy and Women

BY ALINA THOMAS

Alina Thomas is the Chief Executive Officer of Support Help and Empowerment (SHE), a family violence counselling and education service operating across Tasmania. In her representation of women, violence and anti-oppression, Alina considers the diversity of the community and strives for inclusion and equal access of all women regardless of their lived experience, identity or socio-economic background.

For many of us the idea of literacy is related to a person's ability to read and write. However, 'literacy' as a term and a concept is now being used in broader ways to refer not only to the ability to use written language but also our ability to gain knowledge, solve problems, navigate social systems, use technology and even think critically about our environment.

As a professional in the family violence sector in Tasmania, working predominantly with women, I am compelled to think about how low literacy might impact on women differently to how it might impact on men; and on this subject I will address a few key points.

Given the established links between literacy levels and a range of outcomes for children, women's low literacy has flow-on effects for society more broadly.

Women in our communities are by default the carers. Partly influenced by men's higher earning capacity, it is predominantly assumed that women are primary carers to children: managing the health care for the family, doing

the majority of the shopping and cooking in the house and therefore being responsible for the family's nutritional intake. In the 15–64 year age group 72.5 per cent of primary carers are women (ABS).

The time spent caring for children serves to nurture them, provide role models, help with educational needs, and teach life and socialisation skills. This time shapes the child's view of the world and lays the foundations of self-perception and adult potential.

Our educational – and economic – outcomes are associated with our families of origin. A parent's education will partly determine that of their children. As carers, women have the role of shaping and guiding children's education, starting in the early years and continuing through schooling. There are intergenerational influences on levels of education.

Here I will assert that because of their default roles as carers, women's compromised literacy directly affects to following generations such that patterns of education and engagement become entrenched and encultured.

This may be in part due to reduced access to the benefits of literacy, but a subtler consequence is the reduced experience of citizenship, reduced confidence and reduced sense of legitimacy – resulting in social marginalisation.

This phenomenon is compounded by society's increased dependence on technology and web-based interfaces and less face-to-face service delivery for many essential government services.

Without the competence to access and negotiate our sophisticated and evolving public administration systems, people will find it increasingly difficult to (examples only):

- volunteer at schools – which now requires a 'working with vulnerable people' card that requires completing an online application, and a police check, providing explanation of any criminal charges in writing
- navigate judicial processes – this requires understanding of legal systems and that their highly flexible timeframes can be changed at short notice

- attain employment – low level and early entry jobs (labouring, farming, retail, waiting) that used to be considered ‘unskilled’ now require certification requiring a financial commitment and a high degree of literacy. Job applications for manual jobs can require candidates to reply to complex selection criteria, often via a web interface.

While these factors will impact similarly on men, the broader impacts on dependents of female carers are significant.

But there are other consequences to women’s compromised literacy.

We now have a clear path connecting gender inequality, rigid gender stereotypes and the experience of family violence.

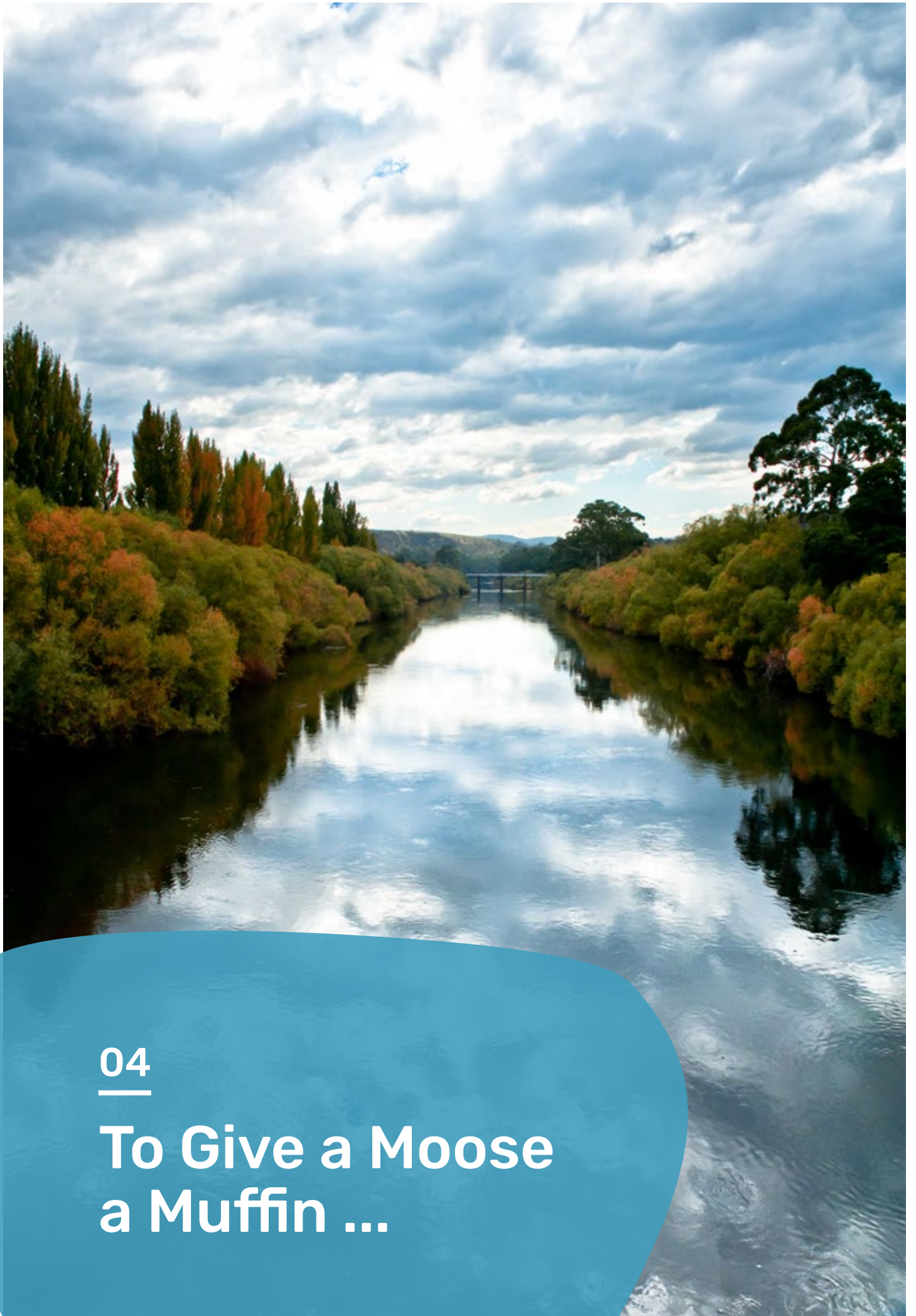
The systemic oppressions that women face because of their gender are reinforced when they experience compromised literacy, which directly hinders women’s full functioning in society. The already-experienced reduced financial capacity, lower paying jobs and scarce access to leadership roles are compounded when there is a lack of functional literacy skills. Consequently, avoiding abusive relationships or finding safety from violence and abusive relationships is further obstructed if a woman has low literacy (and I refer to both the narrow and expanded definitions).

However, literacy is not a measure of worth nor should it be essential for social participation. We do not yet have full literacy across the whole of community, therefore we need to make sure that the mechanisms to participation don’t cut off those with low literacy. People with lower literacy, whether due to educational attainment, intellectual ability, neurodiversity, health or age, should not be at risk of social exclusion, stigmatisation or being relegated to subordinate roles in society.



*Something to think about: In the course of gaining employment, raising children and developing a career, how might women’s experience of low literacy differ to men’s?*





04

**To Give a Moose  
a Muffin ...**



## To Give a Moose a Muffin ...

BY AMELIA JONES

Amelia Jones is a mother of three, including two children with dyslexia. She is a senior leader in the Tasmanian public sector, with a strong interest in education, equity and social justice. Amelia is the co-founder and chair of Square Pegs Dyslexia Support and Advocacy Inc and a former board member of the Hobart Women's Shelter.

**G**rowing up as a child of the '70s on King Island and far from anywhere, reading was a huge part of my life (there wasn't much on telly in those days). My family were all bookworms, and we would stay up all night or in bed all day reading if we could. I had never heard of dyslexia or come across anyone who couldn't easily learn to read.

Fast forward to 2001 and the birth of my beautiful baby boy. He was an only child until he turned six, so had the benefit of my undivided attention and first-time mother's zeal to do the absolute best for her little one. I read hundreds of books to him in his first four years. I loved snuggling together to read his favourites over and over again. *Where is the Green Sheep?*, *The Bad Good Manners Book*, *To Give a Moose a Muffin* and *What Do People Do All Day?* still sit on our bookshelf, ragged and well loved.

It was clear to me that I had a very bright little boy, full of imagination, and it was inconceivable to me that he wouldn't develop a love of reading, just as I had. Off he went to school, where he was given the 100 Magic Words to learn. And learn them he did, by rote, in the order that they were listed on the page. But, when presented with these same words in a book or asked to write them,

he was lost. By Prep, we were concerned as he seemed to be behind his peers. We were assured that he would catch up and that all children learn at their own pace.

Fortunately, my mother-in-law knew better. She suggested that we have a formal assessment. When the report was posted to me in the mail, I was devastated! My son had a learning difference. What did this mean? Was he going to be okay? Where could we get help? Was it my fault?

Most mothers experience guilt – lot of guilt – and this just added another layer to my personal hairshirt. Maybe I hadn't tried hard enough? How could I have not known?

This was followed by a strong feeling of fear and the need to protect my son from being teased at school and from the pain of failure ... but of course I couldn't. He was very aware of his own struggles relative to his classmates and truly 'comparison is the thief of joy'. I am sure that he has experienced a lot more teasing and pain than I will ever know. But his confusion, anxiety and devastated sense of self-esteem were as evident as they were heartbreaking.

For a number of years, we fumbled our way through a range of costly assessments, tutors and literacy programs, largely unsure of whether we were on the right track. The internet was full of information, much of it confusing, contradictory or misleading. We didn't know who to trust. We felt very much on our own.

Eventually, I came into contact with other parents going through a similar experience and even found that there were a number at the same school – although each of us were unaware of the other and had felt equally isolated! This led to Square Pegs and the start of a network of people, including parents, psychologists, speech pathologists, educators and academics all of whom want to help children with learning differences reach their potential. Finally, some people who understood what we were going through!

This network has been a lifeline. It provided comfort and confidence that our son has a bright future. It also highlighted that our story is not an uncommon one. There are in fact many children and families going through the same challenging journey. There are also many teachers and professionals looking for ways to help children with dyslexia to *learn to read*, so that they can go on to *read to learn*.

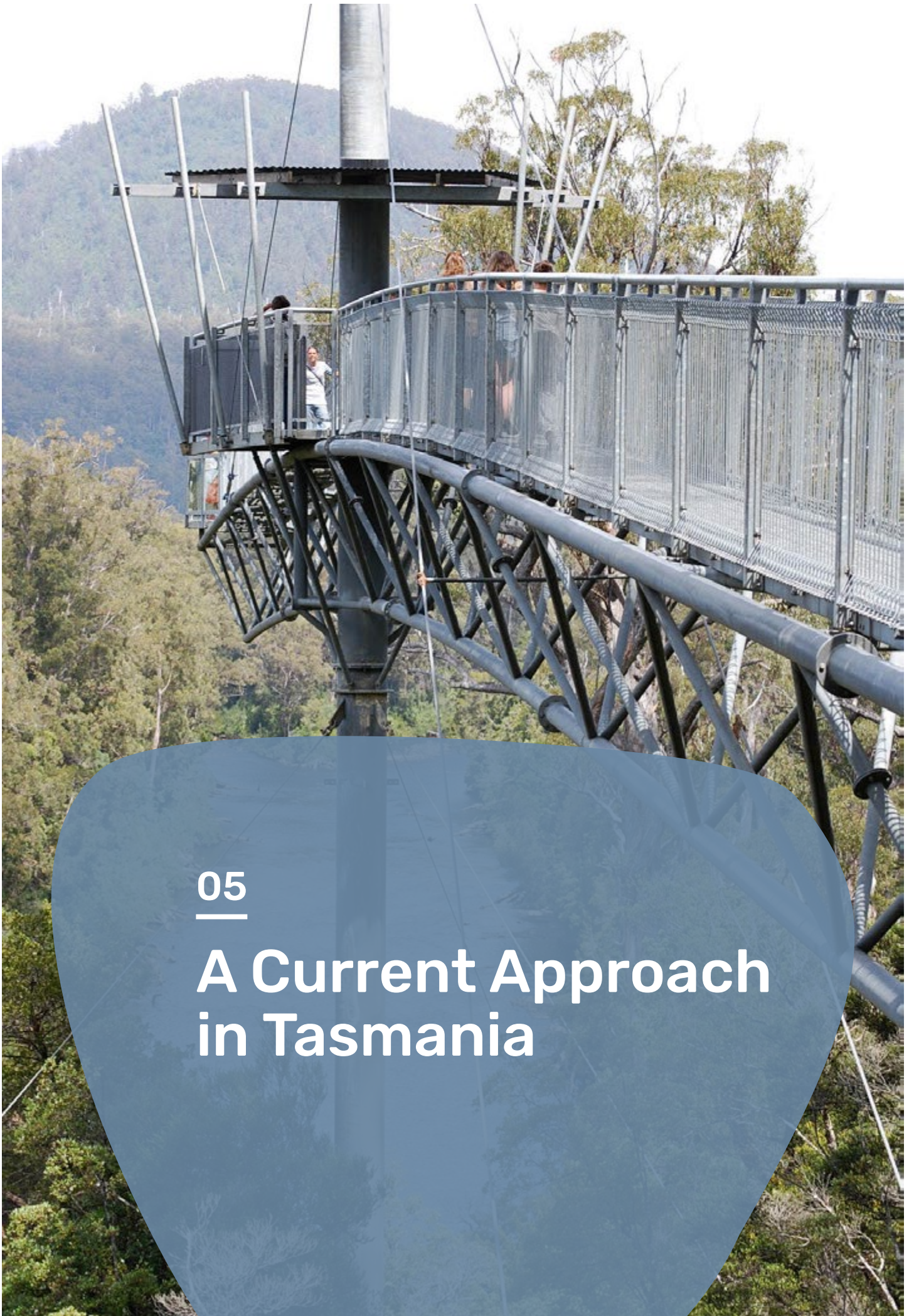
Most mothers experience guilt – a lot of guilt – and this just added another layer to my personal hairshirt. Maybe I hadn't tried hard enough? How could I have not known?

My son's journey and that of my family has shown me the power of and necessity for a child-centred, collaborative approach to providing support for children with dyslexia and addressing the broader literacy crisis in Tasmania.

It is critical for parents, educators, allied-health professionals and others involved with children who have dyslexia to overcome any sense of blame, shame, guilt, and fear of failure that can result from the shared desperation to find solutions that work, in amongst the many other pressures of life and the classroom.

The evidence is in, the solutions are there ... we just need to act together, with courage and kindness, to ensure that children no longer fall through the gaps.





05

## A Current Approach in Tasmania





## A Current Approach in Tasmania

BY ANITA PLANCHON

Anita Planchon is Manager of Strategy and Engagement at LINC Tasmania. She has a Master of Arts in applied linguistics with a focus on multilingualism and second and subsequent language acquisition, and a career history as a diplomat with postings in Vietnam, Solomon Islands and New Caledonia.

**M**y interest in adult literacy was sparked far from Tasmania. I'd been working in Vietnam – a highly literate country where the most lowly paid, disadvantaged cyclo driver would pass his time reading the newspaper – and then moved to Solomon Islands, where my neighbour asked me to teach her to read because she wanted to be sure no one would take advantage of her. The contrast between those two societies was extreme, and it led me, through the study of linguistics, to look at the preconditions for a literate society and at how people learn to read.

After years working overseas, I was surprised to discover that adults in my own country shared the challenges faced by my Solomon Islands friends. I first saw this through work with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Tasmania, when I heard from exporters that a lack of workers with suitable literacy was limiting their chance to expand.

I came to understand that while there are many reasons why a person can reach adulthood with low literacy – disadvantage, childhood illness, disrupted schooling, learning difficulties – the problem is compounded by advances in technology that have made literacy more crucial today than ever before.

Few realise how lucky we are in Tasmania to have a statewide public library service that is unique in giving all adults access to individualised literacy and numeracy learning.

A person who may have been able to get by in life with low skills several decades ago – dealing face-to-face and over the counter, rather than online – now needs help, particularly when the requirements of their job change or a partner who has attended to the family or business paperwork is no longer on the scene.

These are real people, whom we all know in our small community. Helping them to have better literacy and numeracy will make a difference for all of us, and we all have a role to play.

When I got the chance to come to work for LINC Tasmania in 2014, my goal was to ensure that the extraordinary commitment this state has made, with tripartisan support, to raising adult literacy achieved results. And I am confident that 26TEN, Tasmania's strategy to engage business, community, government and individuals to have a collective impact on literacy and numeracy levels, and LINC Tasmania's statewide adult literacy service, which is part of that collective effort, are changing lives every day.

Few realise how lucky we are in Tasmania to have a statewide public library service that is unique in giving all adults access to individualised literacy and numeracy learning. The service was established under the Tasmanian Adult Literacy Action Plan in 2010. Seven literacy coordinators were initially placed in urban libraries, with a further fifteen joining them in regional areas around the state, in Risdon Prison and in community corrections, in 2012. Today the service is supported by managers, administrative staff, customer service officers, and our 26TEN library collection which contains material specifically chosen for emerging readers.

Importantly, it is also supported by a pool of over 800 trained volunteers who work one-on-one with clients who need help to improve their skills.

LINC Tasmania has always had the advantage of being a welcoming and friendly community space well-placed to engage adults who need support. Our recent focus has been on ensuring our volunteer workforce and coordinators are providing the highest quality literacy learning, based on strong evidence, so that all clients get the knowledge, skills and practice they need to read, write and communicate better.

We use the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) to assess our clients and to map learning needs and we place a special focus on adult learning principles – making learning relevant and practical, acknowledging prior experience, setting meaningful goals, encouraging self-directed learning and encouraging self-reflection.

We are also working to make sure that our coordinators and volunteers use approaches based on evidence to ensure learners build all the foundational elements they need to become efficient readers and writers: oral language, phonological awareness, letter-sound knowledge (phonics), vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. Australia's National Inquiry into the Teaching of Reading in 2005 identified five of these elements, and more recently added a sixth, oral language, which underpins all the other elements. The family literacy programs run in our libraries around the state, Rock and Rhyme and Story-time, are aimed at developing this early foundation skill that is so crucial to successful literacy learning.

It is rewarding to hear feedback from our clients who have taken the step to get support and are finding they are more confident, can better support their children and engage better with their communities because their skills have improved. Our challenge is to make sure more people take advantage of the opportunities offered in this state to help people build their skills. We need to work together, through the collective effort that 26TEN can drive, to spread the word that it is possible to build your skills, and change your life.



*Something to think about: What would life be like for you if reading was hard for you?*



06

# Baby Talk





## Baby Talk

BY DR BECKY SHELLEY

Dr Becky Shelley is Deputy Director at the Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment and a leader of the B4 Coalition. She has experience working for government, the community sector and peak sector bodies developing policy and program responses to address complex social issues.

Smiling and baby-talking with infants and watching them smile and make sounds in response is one of life's pleasures.

Happily, it is also an activity that supports learning because these early interactions are very important steps in developing language. Speaking, mimicking and playing with infants enhances emergent literacy skills, and also assists in laying the foundations for the development of social and emotional skills. Child development researchers agree that early language development is one of the most foundationally important skills of early childhood.

We can all model language skills with infants and young children.

This can be done in many ways. Expressing emotions, reflecting and speaking about things that have happened or observing the world around us are natural ways to use language with children. Actively listening, pausing and waiting for a response, and responding to infants and young children are all ways to model social behaviour.

Advances in neuroscience have enhanced researchers' appreciation of the neural networks associated with language development. These are generally established within the first year of life. So what can we do to strengthen these neural connections?

As a community we can all play a role. Together all these activities help infant brains to make connections and develop social skills that support overall wellbeing.

Well, it's good news.

The 'burden' of chatting and engaging with infants can be enjoyed by many. We can all smile at a baby in a pram, or respond to a toddler in a waiting room, stopping to listen if they choose to chat with us. It is not simply for parents to build these skills. As a community we can all play a role. Together all these activities help infant brains to make connections and develop social skills that support overall wellbeing.

Our conversations with babies introduce words to infants and young children to help build understanding about the different sounds and the different parts that make up words. We should also not underestimate the importance of encouraging babies to make sounds, verbalise and form words. These everyday experiences and interactions with babies and infants can build and strengthen neural networks and language acquisition.

The 'B4 Coalition' has a goal to raise awareness across Tasmania about the value of the early years. Thinking about our interactions with babies and young children is an important part of this.

Reading books with babies from birth is a great way to spend time snuggling together to enjoy playing with sounds and words. Rhyming books, textured books and repetitious books assist in the development of emergent literacy skills. Importantly, reading with babies exposes them to the conventions of text - pages are turned from left to right, words are read from left to right. Point to each word as you read it.

It is not difficult to find opportunities to read – they are literally everywhere! On the milk carton, the cereal packets, road signs, bumper stickers, reading the shopping list, the possibilities are endless. Naming objects selected when stacking a trolley or packing a bag or cleaning up toys is also a way to increase vocabulary and contribute to developing literacy. The more opportunities in which babies and young children are exposed to new words, the better!

‘Baby talk’ builds the foundations for learning. Also, importantly, it strengthens a prerequisite condition for early childhood development – connectedness.

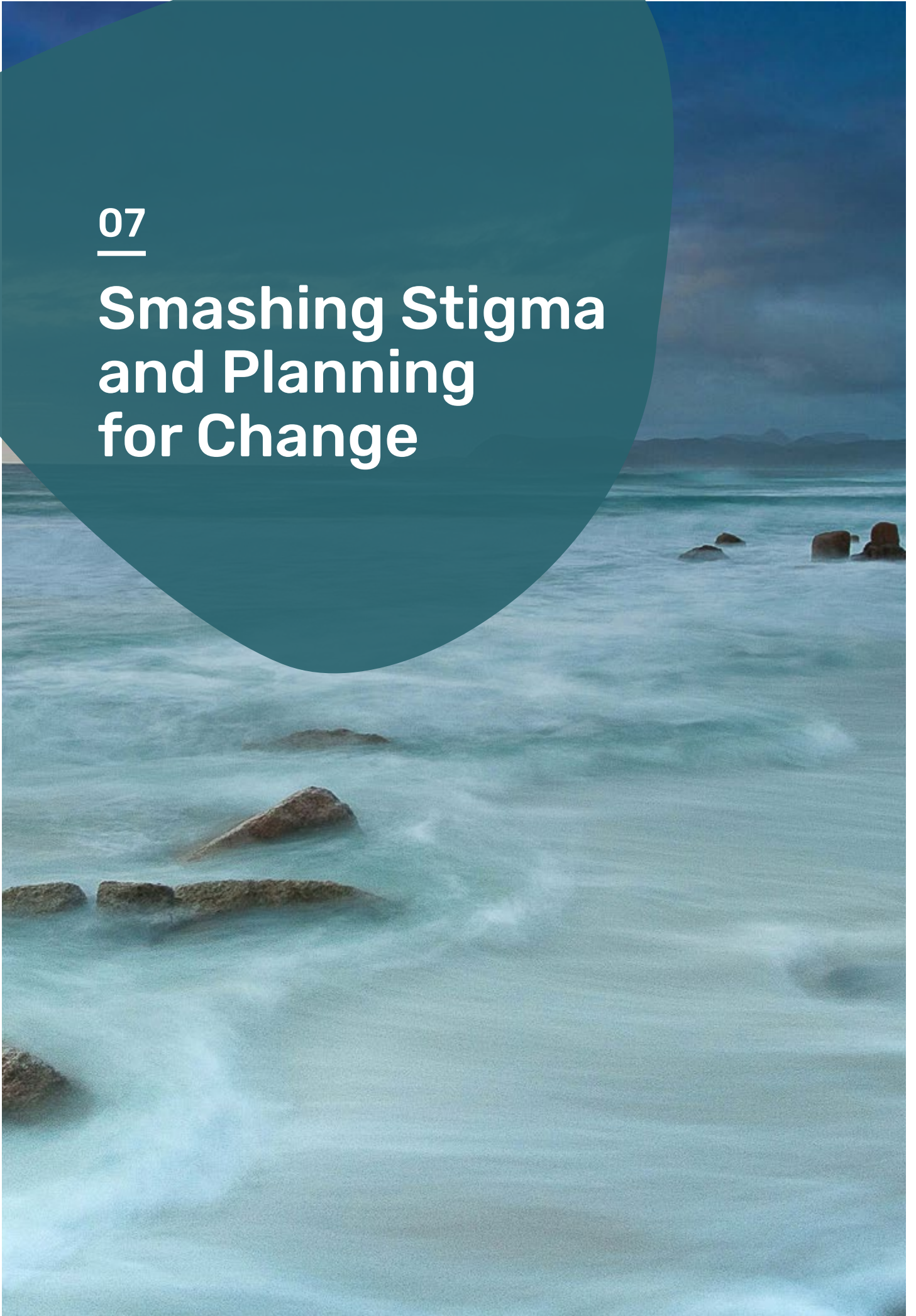


*Something to think about: What are two things you could do to support children’s development in the early years?*



07

# Smashing Stigma and Planning for Change







# Smashing Stigma and Planning for Change

BY BERNADETTE BLACK

Bernadette Black is the CEO & founder of Brave Foundation and is a global pathway strategist. She is a leader in development and implementation of collaborative government policy for those experiencing heightened disadvantage in Australia.

A pathway forward for all people experiencing heightened vulnerability – that’s the Australia I want to be part of.

I am a passionate pathway architect and strategist.

This could be because of my background as a registered nurse, where our day-to-day shifts rotated around pathway plans like the 24-hour clock we kept; or my instinct as a young girl to make sure everyone was treated fairly and equally despite their background or ability. Perhaps this drive to lead people forward came from when I became a young mother at 16 and had to forge a pathway forward of my very own.

I’m a 41-year-old woman now with a few worldly accolades on my belt including a few degrees; although far more weighty than these has been the power of support, acceptance and relationships in my life – for who I am, not the situation I was in.

My life story, and the incredible village of people in it, gives testimony that when a strategy is executed to bring support and acceptance around a person, both their social and economic outcomes are seriously altered for the betterment of all in our communities.

I've had the privilege of conceiving, planning, developing and now implementing Australia's first national strategy for expecting and parenting teens to be able to have the same access to support and education as any other Australian teen. Imperative to this strategy has been including expecting and parenting teens in all phases of development from start-up to success, as well as looking at interception points for allied health professionals, educators, social and community services, to see where and when an expecting and parenting teen will be engaged.

What I have learned is that for a strategy to work, the people we work with must want the strategy to begin with. This means including them in early consultation and planning. I have also learned what prevents access to strategy uptake – the barriers placed by historical and independent cultures amongst organisations, NGOs and governments.

When I look at Tasmania's wicked illiteracy problem, I believe we truly do need to communicate the heart of literacy. We need to ask those facing illiteracy when and where they had, or didn't have, opportunities to learn to read, from childhood to mature age.

A timeline could then be developed with interception points of opportunity identified. These interception points will trigger towards different pathway streams. For example, workplace literacy programs, maternal and child health literacy opportunities, Centrelink – these are a few of the many opportunities and gateways where our community services can take an active role in reducing illiteracy in Tasmania. Most importantly, it needs to be in a place where the person experiencing illiteracy has a trusted relationship.

We will only achieve change when members of the community facing illiteracy are activating that change.

When I look at Tasmania's wicked illiteracy problem, I believe we truly do need to communicate the heart of literacy. We need to ask those facing illiteracy when and where they had, or didn't have, opportunities to learn to read, from childhood to mature age.

To smash stigma associated with illiteracy, policies, procedures and toolkits for workplaces, schools, government and community organisations need to be adopted and implemented, demonstrating a pathway forward for a person experiencing illiteracy in a trusted environment wherever they find themselves in their daily life.

As a community we need to be bold in leading policy change, not waiting on governments.

Whilst we create real pathways towards literacy, we also need to take on the responsibility for failing our community in this area. This is a crucial step so that those facing illiteracy understand that this outcome is not about personal shame, stigma or intelligence – but more a coming together of two worlds that haven't met yet.

This will be a bold move for governments – although one of integrity, if made. This will also start building a relationship with those we aim to assist on their literacy journey.

Changing the wicked illiteracy problem Tasmania faces is more about focusing on how those experiencing illiteracy think they could become literate, who they are as human beings and the channels and relationships in their day-to-day lives.

It is this brave individualised thinking that holds the key to pathways towards literacy in Tasmania.





08

## Social Development for School Success





## Social Development for School Success

BY PROFESSOR EMERITUS BILL MULFORD AO

Professor Emeritus Bill Mulford AO worked as a teacher, department head, principal and Assistant Director of Education in the schools system before moving to the tertiary sector where his career included a highly successful 14-year term as Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania.

It is time for a review of the goals and indicators for school education in Tasmania. Of particular concern is that non-cognitive factors are given relatively little weight. As a result they are in danger of being neglected by teachers and undervalued by pupils and their parents, community and the government and its education system at a time when they matter more than ever.

The evidence is clear that continuing to ignore the non-cognitive, especially interpersonal, collaborative and social development, will result in declining life chances for children. This decline will be particularly acute for those children from lower socio-economic communities.

In brief, evidence makes clear how important social development can be, not only for student feelings of self-worth, day-by-day enjoyment of school and academic results, but also, and perhaps most importantly, for their later life chances. These life chances include employment and earnings levels but apply

especially to work that requires interpersonal skills and teamwork, economies that are increasing the size of their services sector and our ability to respond positively to concerns that society is not as cohesive as it should be.

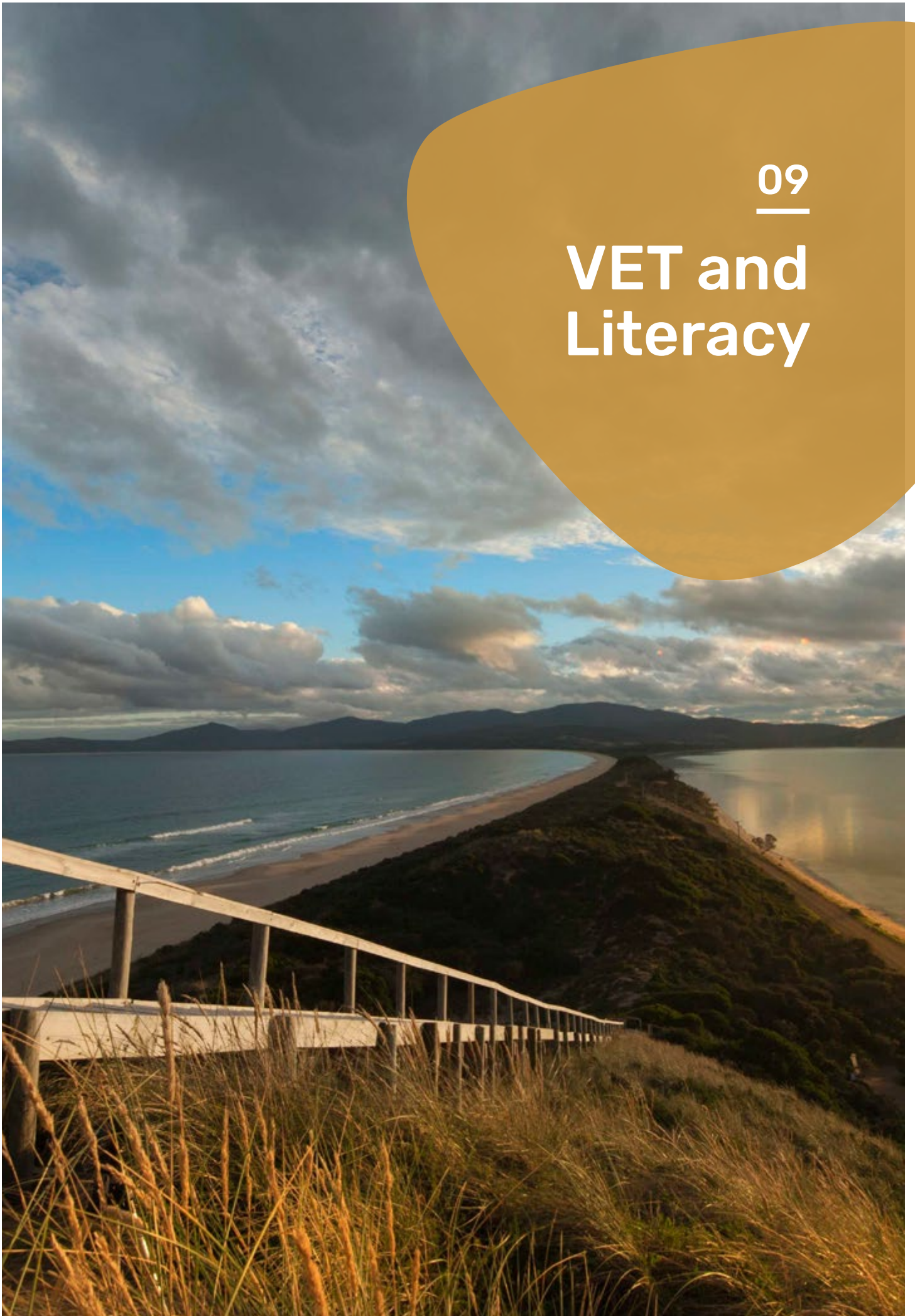
Despite the above evidence, our current curriculum gives non-cognitive factors relatively little weight and they are measured, recorded and reported inadequately by national tests, such as NAPLAN. We need to measure what we value, not value what we think we can easily measure. International and national agencies agree and have started to move in these broader directions with their measures. Tasmania needs to follow and include and publicise the results specifically related to social development, in addition to the existing indicators on literacy, numeracy and retention.

School success, especially in achieving these broader goals, is also most likely when there is a strong focus on interpersonal, collaborative and social development. What works is strong collaborative local learning systems created in and between schools, and between a school and its community. In brief, school success is all about establishing communities of professional learners. As internationally recognised Tasmanian research shows us clearly how to do this, there needs to be Government/Department of Education indicators that measure the extent to which they have facilitated communities of professional learners in and across Tasmanian schools and their communities.

If the Tasmanian Government chooses to prioritise in a very narrow number of areas, to avoid measuring what is most valued (because it is most predictive of long-term individual and community success in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world) and gloss over being judged themselves for their ability to bring on board the professionals (through facilitating schools as communities of professional learners), they, not the schools, must take responsibility for the inevitable negative results. One hopes the Tasmanian Government will not abrogate its responsibility, for remediation of inadequate investments in the areas of social development once a child has left school is difficult and very costly. Also, it benefits no one in our society if government actions, or inaction, result in lowering the professionalism of its most important employees, the teachers and school leaders. The government needs to ensure that it is part of the solution and not part of the problem for school education.

09

# VET and Literacy





## VET and Literacy

BY BOBBY COURT

Bobby Court has been a senior secondary educator for over 40 years. She was Lead Principal, responsible for establishing the nationally awarded Southern Tasmanian Catholic Colleges Trade Training Centre, provider of vocational education and training.

Just yesterday I was greeted by a friendly young man at the airport who reminded me I was his ‘old’ principal. He was on his way back to Queensland where he enjoys a highly successful career in the building industry. He reminded me that school was not for him – ‘just couldn’t do it’ – but he did learn, begrudgingly, how to read and write. He oozed pride as he listed the many exciting building projects he had contributed to, that he was buying an investment property in Hobart, and he assured me he would return to Tasmania, his home.

He represents the increasing and significant number of young people for whom the mainstream ATAR-driven curriculum is a mismatch, having capacity to exclude and disengage. The Vocational Education & Training (VET) pathway he chose enabled him to succeed and thrive; his schooling fortunately and possibly by chance providing him with the requisite literacy skills to achieve his qualification. One could propose that if his school experience could have been grounded by literacy, numeracy and other skills-based courses to scaffold his construction avenue, he may well have completed Year 12 and added a TCE to his portfolio.



It is immediately obvious to students without the requisite reading and writing ability that they must acquire them to be able to work in industry; whether to read a gauge, fill in the auto job sheet, read the construction site plan, read the hospitality event plan or recipe and prepare orders.

Fortunately, this approach and the increasing positive regard of teachers and parents (the influencers) to the value of VET for learners and for their expansive and lucrative career opportunities, sees schools and colleges embracing, promoting and celebrating the VET pathway. They do need to be serious providers though, recognising that many of the students who will excel in the VET environment will only achieve the qualification they deserve if they are explicitly taught sound literacy skills.

One of the many challenges around ensuring that non-mainstream, applied learners become effectively literate is that some parents and some teachers still think that one does not need good literacy skills to do VET, and see the pathway as a default choice for young people who have 'failed' the traditional curriculum, declaring with acceptance that reading and writing is not for them. The fact is that the achievement of a vocational/trade qualification or successful employment in an 'unskilled' area requires literacy. So, both the disengagement with the 'education' journey and this misconception quickly and seriously reduce choice, opportunity and the fullest potential to live a meaningful life.

It is immediately obvious to students without the requisite reading and writing ability that they must acquire them to be able to work in industry; whether to read a gauge, fill in the auto job sheet, read the construction site plan, read the hospitality event plan or recipe and prepare orders.

For teachers of VET the aim is to ensure students gain the reward of being able to complete assessments without perfect literacy skills (reasonable

adjustment). They also identify those assessments in the qualification that require students to read and write and then work with students to enable them to learn enough to be able to do these assessments ... and hopefully a lot more. The most obvious examples are in automotive and engineering where reading plans and auto manuals are a vital part of assessments. Early childhood education and care provides another example. Just recently a VET colleague told me of a work placement employer who had spoken to a student about completing a task by 12 noon. By 12.15 pm the student had not started to do the job. When the employer asked why, the student said she could not tell the time on the clock on the childcare centre wall. Such a simple literacy skill, assumed to be in place, but more often than not absent from a young person's knowledge with consequent deficiency and embarrassment.

Many employers in the trades area may have, themselves, started in the industry when literacy was not as critical, and they got by; many highly successful in their industry, but held back by their inability to read and write. Now, they are the first to tell us that communications skills, teamwork and literacy and numeracy are more important than the technical trade skills. As a consequence of listening to their wisdom, all quality 'VET in schools' models either integrate VET so that students are doing English and maths as well as their VET subjects, or they prepare a package of skills and knowledge centred on their particular trade. In this way, literacy and numeracy are learnt as part of the VET package. Both models need to place the students' needs at the centre in evaluating their worth and effectiveness. It is now a requirement that all Registered Training Organisations find a way to support students who require extra help. This of course greatly assists those young people who have traversed the challenges of grappling with a curriculum geared to traditional and higher order pathways and stay the course to make it into a suitable VET course where they can succeed and thrive. They are resilient enough to get through in spite of their literacy deficiency, and with great pragmatism realise developing these skills are essential.

We then break down the barriers,  
include them, affirm their value and  
deliver what is their right...

What, however, happens to those students who struggle within the constraints of the traditional curriculum, whose worth and meaning to them is non-existent? It is entirely understandable that many opt out or stay and walk the treadmill of exclusion and failure, and experience little choice of any sort of success. The inevitable disengagement with learning and ambition to connect with meaningful work life sees them move to the margins with little prospect apart from contributing to the 'data' of dependence.

These are the young people who demand our attention with early intervention of relevant and equally valued, practical curriculum offerings where the basic literacy and numeracy skills are embedded creatively in courses with an obvious and achievable outcome. We then break down the barriers, include them, affirm their value and deliver what is their right ... access to learning and personal formation which is life-giving and lifelong, confidently reading the clock on the wall with every experience.



*Something to think about: How do you as a member of our Tasmanian community share in the responsibility to ensure that all our young people are able to access meaningful and purposeful learning opportunities both in school and beyond, connecting them with the lifelong benefits of being literate, confidently and capably contributing to their world? How will you find a way to influence change and to enable and encourage young people towards what is rightfully theirs?*





10

**Feed and Read:  
A Small Group  
Event for Children  
Under Five and  
Their Carers**





## Feed and Read: A Small Group Event for Children Under Five and Their Carers

BY DR PENNY JOOLS AND BRAD FREEMAN

Dr Penny Jools and Brad Freeman are clinical psychologists who have worked in the areas of child and adolescent, couple and family mental health for over 30 years each. They visit Ptunarra Child and Family Centre in New Norfolk each week, providing a healthy shared lunch and reading a couple of stories to engage adults and children in a literacy-focused event.

Leo is three and he is looking up at us with big and wondering eyes as we read our story to a group of children and adults. We have learned to keep the stories we read very simple. Not too many words, even though a good many of the children at our feet or sitting on their parent's laps often follow storybooks with far more text. We notice that all the children are enjoying the story, even the babes, even the restless five-year-olds.

Short simple stories with big clear pictures seem to confirm the child's sense of competence. They can really grasp and take in the story, even though they have heard it many times before. They sit straight, attend closely and look satisfied and confident, answering our rhetorical questions about whether Albert the naughty dog is lonely, or whether the hungry caterpillar could really eat so much food.

We had at first thought that more complex and subtle stories would extend the children and possibly be of more interest to the adults. But we discovered that simplicity seemed to be crucial to the success of the project at Ptunarra Child and Family Centre.

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Luke, 18 months old, is sitting alongside his mum, watching the pages turn and gazing intently at the pictures. But then his attention wanders to the ride-on toys in the garden outside and he starts to get up to investigate. Just then a tray of banana cake is passed to his mum, who offers Luke a slice. Luke sits back down, settles into his mum's arms and begins to attend closely to the story again, munching his cake with a contented look. An important link has been made: books and stories and sitting in a group is a safe and lovely thing to do; it is a family thing to do.

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The child and family centres have offered a game-changing strategy to launch children into formal learning. Each centre (there are twelve in Tasmania) offers a relaxed preschool-like setting, where children (mostly under five) and their parents, family or carers can drop in, participate in events or just hang out. Centres are staffed by a variety of community workers, early education specialists and nurses, as well as offering space for visiting professionals. The centres have a particular brief to enable more vulnerable children and families to easily access relevant services.

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Tamara is three and can be quite anxious and unsettled. Her family experienced some difficult and traumatic times after her mum was injured in a motor vehicle accident with Tamara in the car. At times she is cross or clingy with her dad, easily upset or oppositional to adult requests. Sitting and attending in a group is harder for her. But Tamara has come to use the story event as a quiet, settled time, either sitting on her dad's lap or on Penny's. She tracks very closely a story about a woman losing her hat in a big wind, turns the pages eagerly and comments at the end, 'She got her hat back, Dad!'

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As psychologists working in the field of infant and child mental health, we believe that all learning occurs in the context of relationships.

As psychologists working in the field of infant and child mental health, we believe that all learning occurs in the context of relationships. Learning is based on the capacity of the mind to make sense of experience and to link experiences together. When sitting with a parent and being read stories, children have the best opportunity to learn how ideas are linked with emotions and relationships. A sense of safety allows young children to discover and become curious enough to learn about their world, about the worlds waiting in books and stories. So often we think about learning as something children come to when separated from their family. But being ready to acquire literacy skills starts a long time before sitting on the group mat in kindergarten.

In the Feed and Read project, we try to create the conditions for parents and children to experience words, text, story in an atmosphere of safety and relatedness. We hope this will encourage adults to read to their children at home and acclimatise the children to participating in a group focused on literacy. Supporting the relationship between child and adults, as early as possible, provides the best basis to ensure children have the capacity to think and feel secure in facing the future demands of learning.

Allie had a very traumatic start to life. She was born premature and her father was violent towards her mother and unpredictable for her. Both mother and child are very anxious, and sit on the outer edge of the group when they first attend Feed and Read. But over time, with familiar and predictable routine, Allie comes to really enjoy listening while the story unfolds, with her mum's arms wrapped around her. Penny asks the group, 'Does anyone have a naughty dog like Albert at home?' Ally calls out assertively, 'We have a naughty dog. He jumps up and licks people but he never bites.'

We believe the child and family centres offer a very good model for supporting families to build more trusting relationships with professionals by allowing informal access to expert opinion. For example, after building up some rapport with visiting parents over time it becomes possible for centre staff to gradually identify and talk to parents about their child's language development and make a supported referral to a speech pathologist. Even more significantly, we have observed centre staff 'contain' and manage some very at-risk family circumstances and support them to find better ways of managing stress and conflict. Reducing danger and stress enables children to develop and learn in ways they cannot if they are troubled and preoccupied by worry.

In this age in which literacy acquisition is often screen-based, adults may also need some support and guidance on how to use new technologies with their children. Children are watching their adults attending to phones but in a manner that is not a shared activity.

Because parents are at their most vulnerable and open to learning new ways of doing things in the first years of their child's life, this is the time to devote resources to achieve the most cost-effective long-term outcomes. Our experience has been that this kind of milieu-based intervention offers opportunities to provide early intervention for deficits and difficulties which otherwise might not be addressed until many years later.

Many parents who have grown up in deprived circumstances have poor relationships with literacy and have difficulty passing on to their children a living interest in books and reading, expecting that 'the professionals' will 'train' these skills later. Parents who were not read to as children feel particularly anxious when no one has quite shown them how it is done, nor how pleasurable it is for children to share books with parents.

If the parents' own literacy skills are poor, they may be less willing to read to their children due to fear of exposing their difficulties. When these children start formal learning, they have little relationship with books and reading, and no context for literacy acquisition as a fun, shared experience. For this reason, we believe that some parents need models and shared experiences rather than being told what to do and how to do it. We think the key is using books to further the relationship rather than to teach children literacy. It is about learning as play in the context of a loving relationship, rather than learning as a task.



The earlier this starts the better.

The local schools give feedback that children attending the child and family centres are much more relaxed and open to the challenges of starting school. They are described as 'ready for learning'. Just like taking in food, children absorb good experiences that help them grow and develop. Reading stories together in a group with their carers in a relaxed setting can lay the foundations for secure relationships and greater confidence in learning.

*(Names and circumstances have been changed to maintain confidentiality.)*



11

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**One-minded  
Vision**



# One-minded Vision

BY CEDRICK KAYEMBE MULUMBA

Cedrick Kayembe Mulumba is a motivational speaker, teacher, advocate of social justice and a PhD candidate with Deakin University.

I was born in one of Central Africa's beautiful countries – the Democratic Republic of Congo. I am not only a Congolese–Australian but also a citizen of the world.

Because of the many challenges that my fellow Congolese and I were and are still facing, in 2002 I decided to leave the mosaic country with a one-minded vision: to 'help the Congo and the world overcome some of the most significant challenges: conflicts, human rights abuses, poverty and illiteracy?'

In the process of finding the ways and means to fulfil my vision, I found myself in Tasmania in May 2008. I was like a sheep lying down in green pastures and sitting beside quiet waters due to the countless opportunities for me.

From the first few minutes after landing, there was a common trend – all information was in a written form. I needed to make sense of every piece of information, but my limited English language was a barrier to overcome. Knowing that written language and spoken language are two inseparable twins, their acquisition was not only necessary in managing the daily demands of my new life as a migrant in Tasmania but also for being able to unwrap the different opportunities in my new home. As a native French speaker, written and spoken English were, therefore, a must in any attempt to explore the different opportunities that Tasmania and Australia had to offer.

But how, then, could I unwrap the opportunities I have not explored? How can I explore the possibilities in a language I could not speak, read or write? How can I speak, read and write English without someone teaching me? How could I learn or how can anyone teach unless they are willing to?

In my quest for answers to the questions, the sentiment of French author Victor Hugo who said ‘every child whom we teach is a man whom we gain’ which my parents echoed since my early years never stopped resonating in my mind. As a consequence, I concluded that the only way of doing something about solving the Congo’s and world issues, working for the cause of peace and equal rights between men and women, was through education.

While learning English and completing a return-to-study course at TasTAFE, I also completed my Year 12 studies at Guilford Young College in 2009 and prepared for university. Five years later, I completed a postgrad degree at the University of Tasmania.

You are probably by now admiring how far I have come or even congratulating me for the efforts made over the last few years. I am grateful; however, I feel challenged by the fact that our beautiful island Tasmania is still struggling with one of the catalysts to change children into men – literacy.

It is not a secret that Tasmania has a ‘wicked’ literacy problem with almost one in every two fellow Tasmanians being unable to make sense of the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet and the relationships between them through spoken English. How can Tasmania reverse this trend? Contrary to when I came to Australia, the question this time is not personal, but the quest for an answer is every Tasmanian’s responsibility. I too have a role to play in the making of Tasmania as a ‘modern living Shakespeare’ and have the duty to contribute to the debate.

Drawing from my story, to tackle literacy problems in Tasmania a preventative measure consists of making literacy an essential part of the socialisation process from childhood to adulthood. We cannot underestimate the influence of our immediate environment (parents, relatives and even daily television shows) in developing our spoken language skills. Likewise, the same agencies have the indisputable power to facilitate the ‘knowledge of the code which is the spoken language upon the page’. Don’t we often say that prevention is better than cure?

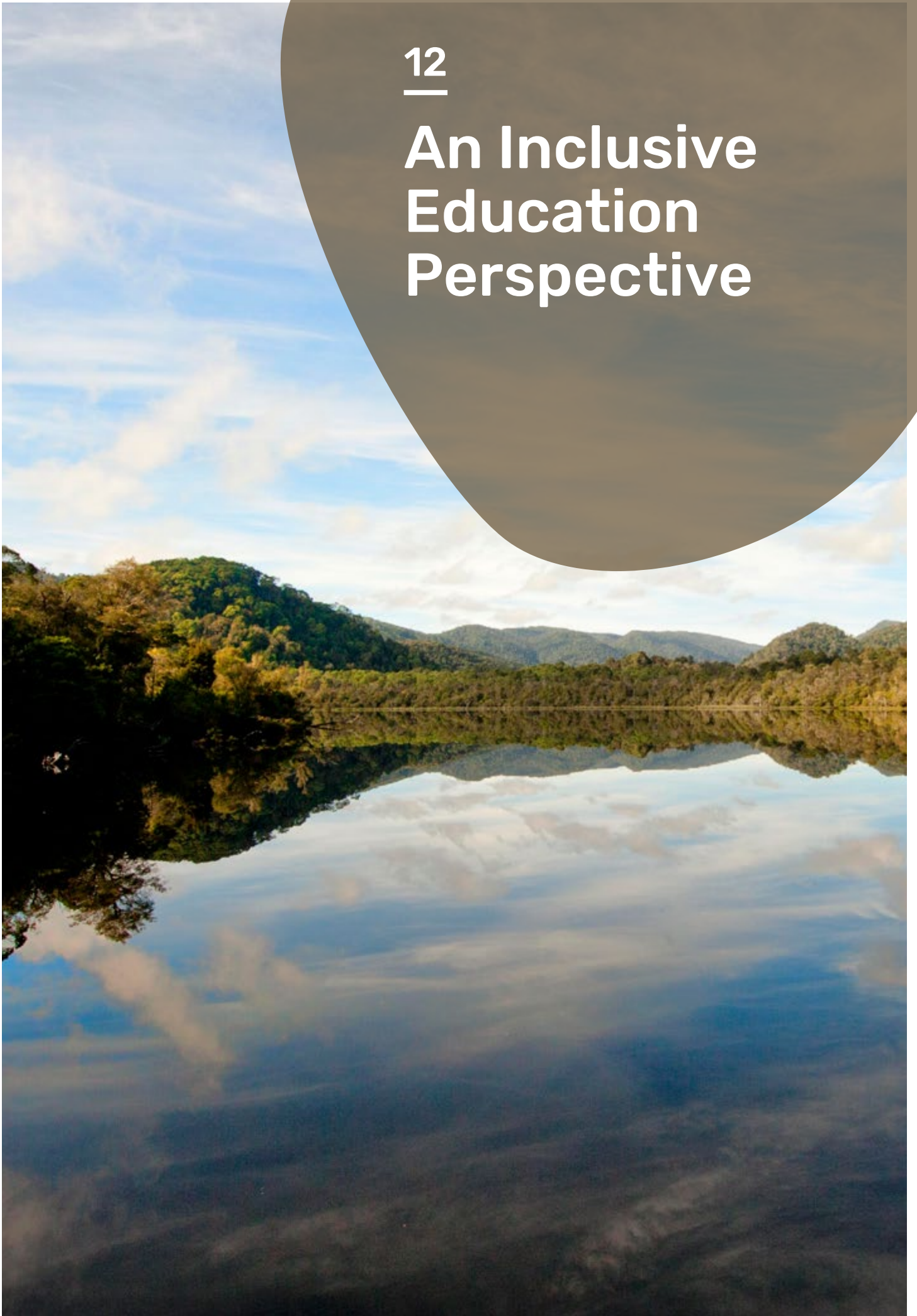


From the first few minutes after landing, there was a common trend – all information was in a written form.

As a remedy to Tasmania's wicked literacy problem, we need to link literacy to the development of adult learners. Where there is a will, there is a way. If one really wants to do something, one can. So often, we are quick to claim that 48 % of us do not show that will. But how can they read and write English unless they are taught? If 48 % of us are functionally illiterate, we contribute to the problem. If Tasmania is illiterate, we are illiterate. Will you be part of the problem or the solution? Start learning, educating and teaching today!

12

# An Inclusive Education Perspective





# An Inclusive Education Perspective

BY DR CHRISTOPHER RAYNER

Dr Christopher Rayner is currently a lecturer in inclusive education and Program Director of the Master of Teaching at the School of Education, University of Tasmania. His teaching and research interests have focused on the ways educators and educational communities promote access, participation, and achievement for students with disabilities.

**A** keen interest in visual-spatial processing for learning arose early in my teaching career. There is some salient truth in the claim that ‘a picture paints a thousand words.’

This interest reflects personal preferences but has also led to a journey of discovery around communication, school, and life in general for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). For me, it has also meant the growing recognition that not everyone thinks, communicates, or understands the world in the same way as the person next to them – an important starting point for any teacher!

After about a decade working with pre-service and in-service educators and researching inclusive education for students with disabilities, I’m still very much a learner; but there are several ideas that I want to share:

1. Inclusive education is as much about the quality of our conversations as it is about the research evidence justifying our practices. It's how we speak about and with people.
2. There are ways to ensure that someone's difficulties with written and/or verbal language don't unnecessarily restrict their access to the rest of the curriculum or to other life experiences.
3. The ability to really listen and to exercise empathy will be a priority for learning communities, and our society more broadly, into the future.

First, while my claim that inclusion is about the 'quality of our conversations' does sound a bit warm and fuzzy, it is also the law. For example, under the Disability Standards for Education 2005, education providers must consult with the student or the student's associate (e.g. parent/carer) before making an adjustment to ensure the student's education is on the same basis as their peers.

There is enough 'grey' in the Disability Standards for Education to ensure that conversations are needed to colour in the spaces where context and individual uniqueness harmonise through mutually respectful relationships.

Although this legislation is specific to students with identified disabilities, the principles reflect the ways in which educators are encouraged to keep the student at the centre of decisions and collaborate with parents/carers across the board.

With greater acceptance of diversity, we are seeing a move towards person-first language, where people are seen first and foremost by what they have in common, rather than by the labels that can have the unintended effect of negative stereotyping. Our language is also shifting towards a focus on what people can do, rather than on what they can't (yet) do. Not only is this a more positive way to look at things, it also provides a more objective and informative basis to plan for future learning.

Second, educators are now discovering that they can be proactive in anticipating student diversity and removing potential barriers to learning, rather than simply 'teaching to the middle' and providing intervention for those who show signs of disengagement, low achievement, or failure. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is gaining traction in Australia (and elsewhere). As



There is some salient truth in the claim that ‘a picture paints a thousand words.’

I see it, UDL principles are what we do for all students (anticipating diversity), while differentiation is what we do for some students and personalising learning is what we do for exceptional learners (responding to diversity). There will always be a need for adapting the curriculum and tailoring educational programs, but the more we can anticipate diversity from the get-go, the more successful our schooling experiences will be for everyone to learn in community.

In practical terms, this means finding multiple means to communicate knowledge (written text, verbal language, pictures, videos, live demonstrations, diagrams, speech-generating devices, and so on) and allowing learners the opportunity to communicate their understanding through a similarly diverse range of media. If a student has difficulty with written language, this needs to be identified and addressed as much as is possible; but there is a greater recognition that such difficulties need not act as a ceiling for their interests or talents in other subjects.

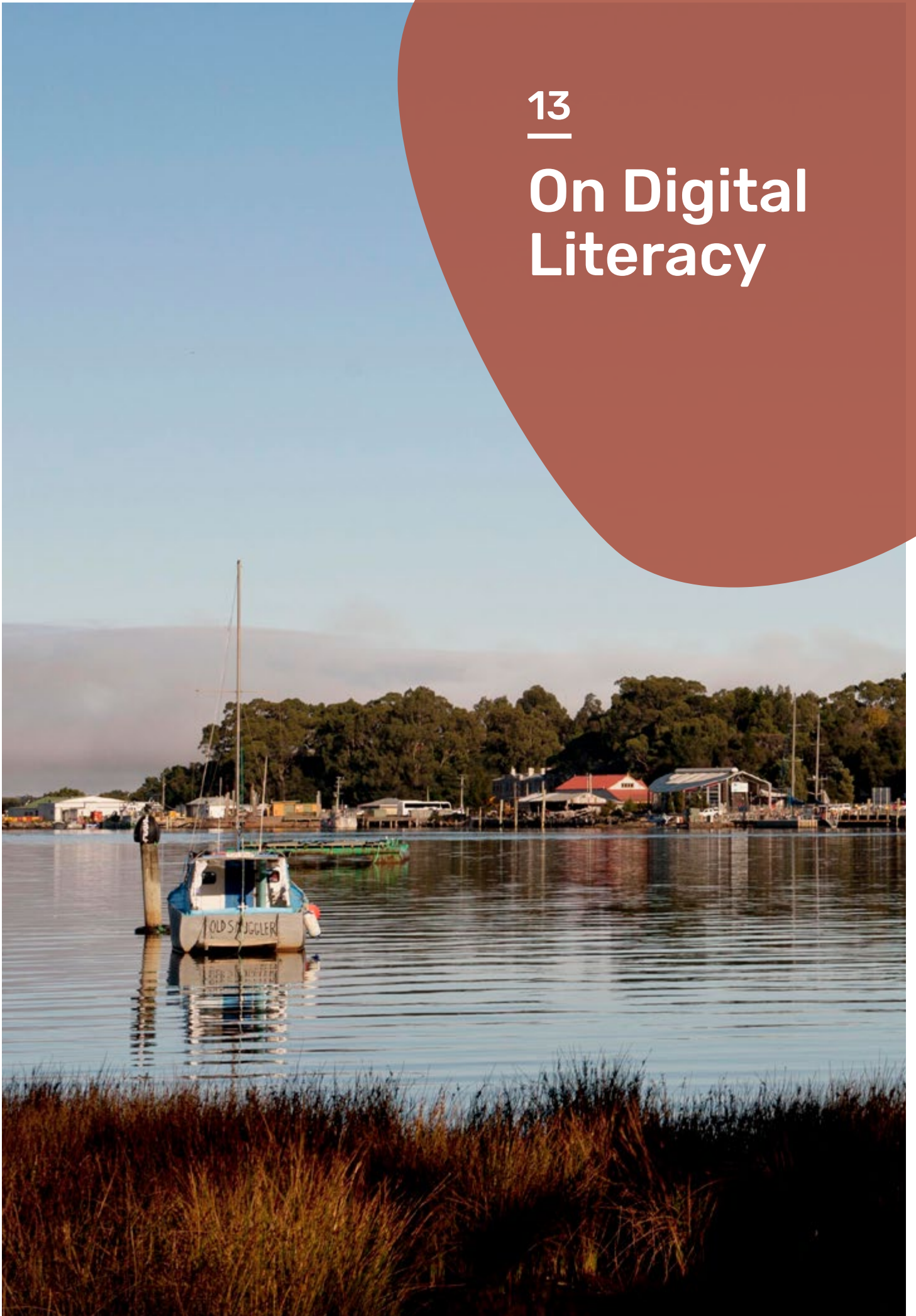
Finally, it is exciting to see the place that emotional intelligence and the capacity for empathy are beginning to take in educational discourse. For example, empathy is mentioned explicitly in three of the seven General Capabilities in the Australian Curriculum: Personal and Social Capability, Ethical Understanding, and Intercultural Understanding. As we develop and model these capabilities ourselves through active listening, we create the relational conditions for learning. As we nurture these capabilities in our young people, there is hope for communities in which each unique individual can experience the sense of belonging that comes with understanding their world and being understood themselves. This, to me, is at the heart of literacy.



*Something to think about: How can the creative arts and technologies help people to overcome barriers caused by difficulty with verbal or text-based communication?*

13

# On Digital Literacy





## On Digital Literacy

BY CRAIG DOW SAINTER

Craig Dow Sainter is a factual TV producer and a developer of online education and training resources for the education, government and corporate sectors in the UK and Australia. He has a particular interest in behavioural change training. He is a partner and managing director at Roar Educate and Roar Film.

**T**he Australian Curriculum measures student literacy as the development of knowledge, skills and dispositions to interpret and use language confidently for learning, communicating and participating effectively in society. It would be reasonable to accept that we are unanimous in our belief that improvement in a population's literacy levels will benefit society as a whole.

But for the most part, in the education sector notions of digital literacy are considered in a technical light and overshadowed by the current obsession for all things STEM. Whilst requisite job skills are shifting toward a technology bent, we must not mistake STEM prowess as being the sole driver of innovation and change. Rather we need a balanced education mix that supports the development of empathic and insightful individuals that understand the digital ecosystem and can perceive and solve problems at all levels, not just technically.

Having a population that is digitally enabled is a key socio-economic factor for government and enterprise. Terms such as digital exclusion and the digital gap equate to leaving the handbrake on when attempting to streamline and

It would be reasonable to accept that we are unanimous in our belief that improvement in a population's literacy levels will benefit society as a whole.

reduce costs of government and commercial service delivery. And given the prevalence of smartphones and community online centres around Australia we know that digital exclusion is not simply a symptom of no online access, but rather a lack of confidence in, and awareness of, the benefits of the Internet and connected technology.

But possibly more worrying is the ignorance and flawed decision making of the digitally included who for the most part have embraced the digital realm but with little or no understanding of what they are relinquishing or how their online behaviour affects others. And given that literacy is about building skills for learning, communicating and effective participation in society, our attention to digital literacy is well short of the ideal.

This argument is not directed solely at young people alone; adult behaviour falls well short of the ideal. A cursory visit to nearly any online forum would demonstrate the point. Anecdotally, on sites as innocuous as DIY help forums, I would estimate that six is the number of posts it takes before things start to get ugly between participants. Understanding is nearly non-existent of online privacy and the extent of what users have had to reveal about themselves in social media platforms. Online fraud is rife but not because of the cleverness of cybercriminals, but rather the ignorance of victims. Disregard for others' online property because if it's online it must be free, right? The increasing prevalence of cyberbullying, far more prolific than reported.

You might think that these are arguments against embracing the digital world, but far from it. These are arguments for a focused and concerted approach to digital literacy for all Australians. A paradigm shift – one where we realise that the perceived anonymity of the Internet is exactly that, perceived. And just because we can't see the person we are abusing, the shopkeeper from whom we are stealing or the organisation we are giving personal data to, they are just

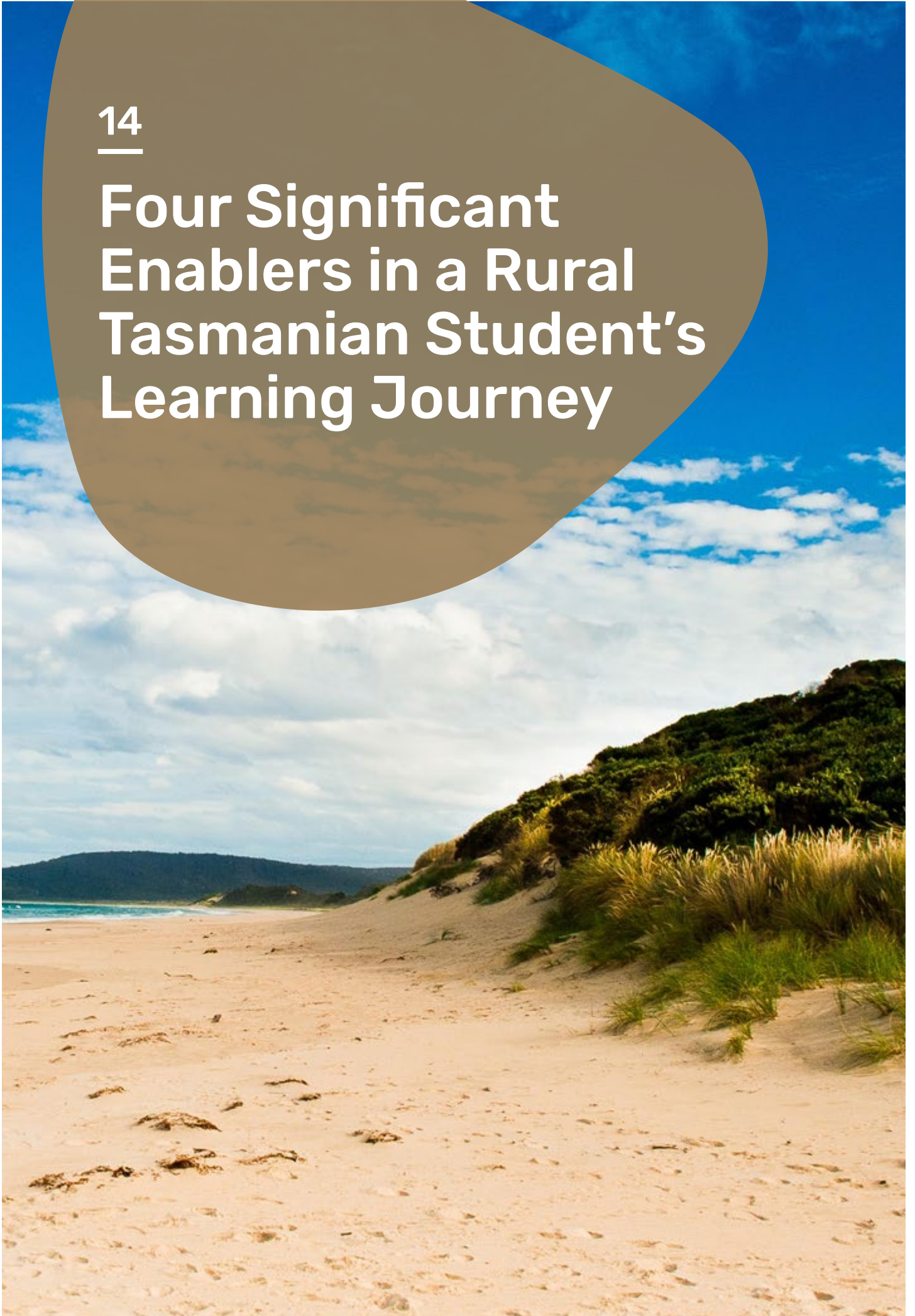


as real as the person next to us on the bus, the grocer down the road and the company we work for.

If we want to be a digitally smart country that benefits from all the positives the connected world offers then we need to be digitally smart and responsible; we need digital literacy skills. And to achieve this we need a government that recognises the issue as a much broader platform, that realises in addition to a technically knowledgeable workforce we need good digital citizens.

14

# Four Significant Enablers in a Rural Tasmanian Student's Learning Journey





## Four Significant Enablers in a Rural Tasmanian Student's Learning Journey

BY DEB HUTTON

Deb Hutton is Principal Project Officer – Literacy Support and Development with the Tasmanian Department of Education (DoE). She began teaching in 1980 in a small, remote Tasmanian Government school. She taught in primary schools for 20 years, followed by 15 years in multiple education roles and now leads department strategy to support literacy learning across DoE sectors and services.

**T**he figure of 48% of adult Tasmanians who do not have the level of literacy required to meet the demands in daily life is indeed concerning. Encompassed within this number, however, is a diverse group of individuals each with a different set of experiences, situations and needs. The challenge, however, is how we acknowledge this diversity, to ensure that we identify the issues relative to the context in which they occur and target support to meet the unique needs across our communities and sectors. Consider Jennifer's story.

I taught Jennifer as a Grade 1 student at a small rural school some distance from a major town. She was the youngest in a family of five children, much loved and cared for. Her siblings were much older and she received a lot of attention from the adults around her. Yet Jennifer was falling behind her peers in early reading and writing skills. Her oral language skills were poor and she wasn't socially confident and did not make friends easily. She was often on

The figure of 48% of adult Tasmanians who do not have the level of literacy required to meet the demands in daily life is indeed concerning.

her own in the playground, and sometimes cried to go home. School was not a happy place for Jennifer.

A new literacy strategy was implemented at the school, as many students were presenting with poor oral language and difficulties with early reading and writing. Jennifer was selected to participate in an intervention program. Over a 15 week period she learnt to read and write to an expected level for her age. She also became more confident in many other aspects of school life and learning. Jennifer's family became engaged in her learning. Daily feedback to Jennifer supported her ongoing improvement in reading and writing skills. Frequent communication between the school and the family supported her learning and celebrated her milestones. She became a fluent and capable reader and writer which continued to improve throughout her years at school.

Fifteen years later I came across Jennifer who told me how she was in the middle of finishing her Honours degree at UTAS. She explained how she was the first person in her family to go to university, and how proud her family was of her achievement.

Four significant enablers contributed to Jennifer's success.

## Capacity

Key to Jennifer's success was her family's capacity to care for and nurture Jennifer's growth, learning and aspirations throughout her life, the teacher's skill and capacity to deliver effective instruction to teach Jennifer the skills required to decode and encode written language, and the school's leadership capacity to make this a priority. Providing ongoing, high-quality professional learning to enable teachers to meet a range of student learning needs continues to be critical in improving student learning.



## Collaboration

The establishment of authentic and respectful relationships is required for families and children to experience the value of learning, provide skills and build confidence and aspiration through shared goals and collective effort. Schools alone cannot be responsible for nor be the sole providers of social change.

## Skill and confidence

Jennifer's growing confidence in her ability as a reader and writer had a significant impact on her capacity to continue to experience success and sustain her efforts into young adulthood. Brain research and neuroscience stresses the importance of experiencing success in early learning for the development of a learner. Timely and constructive feedback, which acknowledges skills and provides guidance to improve, engenders the confidence to take the necessary risks to continue to engage in learning. Focusing on building the skills and the confidence required for future learning, particularly in the first years of schooling, followed by opportunities to deepen skills throughout the middle years, may see a greater number of students equipped to interact with written language across a range of contexts and purposes as older learners.

## Access, participation and engagement

Opportunities to access, participate and engage in learning to meet specific needs across a range of contexts are also required. The teacher's capacity to access professional learning was also critical in acquiring the necessary skills and strategies to deliver the intervention effectively. Finally, the opportunity for Jennifer to access and continue her learning at a tertiary level within close proximity to her home may have been another significant factor in her ability to sustain her engagement in learning. A more collaborative, coordinated, strategic and targeted approach may allow schools and services to make more informed decisions to bring greater precision to prioritise and implement place-based support.

Over recent years, I have witnessed an ever-increasing demand on schools to meet the complex social needs emerging in some of our communities. Schools are seen as effective places to address these issues. This has been coupled with

the introduction in recent years of a very comprehensive Australian curriculum and reporting and assessment system which also places heavy demands on teacher time and school resources.

Recent research suggests that we may be trying to cover too much, too fast, and as a result only brushing the surface of what needs to be learned, leaving little available time to spend deepening the learning and consolidating understandings required for adult learning, work and life. It has been suggested that we may need to slow down the learning and circuit-break the fast pace – to do less, better.

It is timely to review and refocus what is happening in our schools and, in a collective effort, to work across all agencies and sectors of our community to identify key common goals and actions which explore new ways to support and improve the capacity of our services, schools, leaders and teachers to diagnose and deliver quality literacy learning.

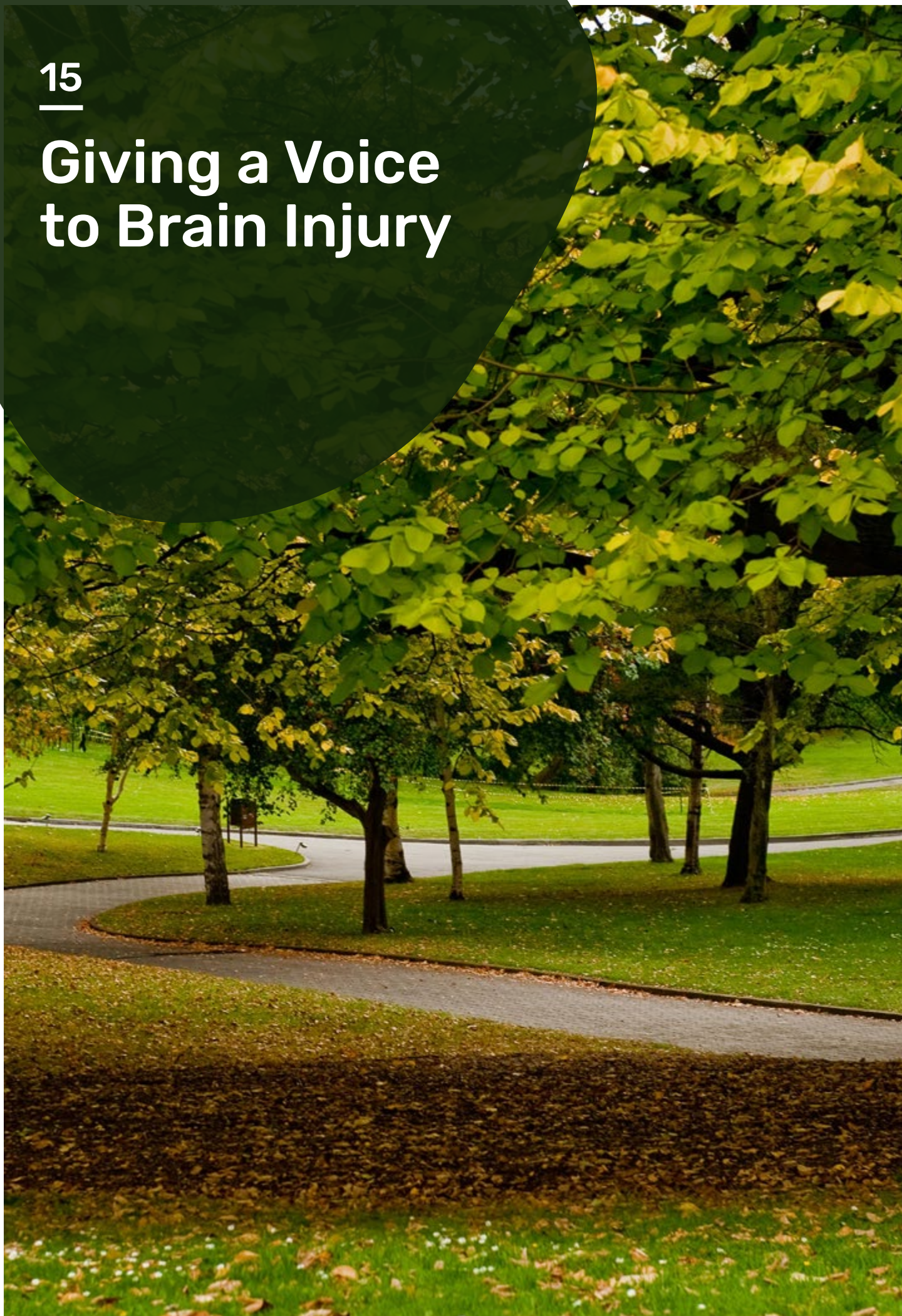


*Something to think about: How can we improve the way we share the responsibility for every child across all aspects of our community to provide the best possible chance to learn and succeed in life?*



15

# Giving a Voice to Brain Injury







## Giving a Voice to Brain Injury

BY DEBORAH BYRNE

Deborah Byrne is the Executive Officer of Brain Injury Association of Tasmania (BIAT), a small not-for-profit organisation dedicated to driving change to improve the lives of Tasmanians living with or affected by brain injury. With brain injury often referred to as the ‘invisible’ disability, Deborah is passionate about broadening the community’s understanding of the complexities associated with, and impact of, brain injury.

*“When a Traumatic Brain Injury affects a person’s quality of life it also affects the community and the economy.”*

(New Zealand Traumatic Brain Injury Strategy and Action Plan 2017–2021)

**A**s humans we use communication to exchange information to control our environments, yet the process from thought to speech is something most of us take for granted. Imagine what it would be like to live in a world where you could not express what it is you want in any given situation. How would you communicate if you could not use words? How would you feel if your words did not work the way you wanted, or if like static on a phone line or crossed wire, you could hear perfectly well but your ability to respond with what you wanted to say was limited? Imagine a world where, because of not being able to express yourself, your days are ‘organised’ by some well-meaning family member, or possibly a carer who has no emotional connection to the decisions they are making on your behalf.



Communication is our biggest right. ‘Complex communication is, after all, what separates us as human. Our ability to use verbal, written, visual, and even electronic forms of communication is unparalleled.’ (Jen Cullen, CEO Synapse). The ability to communicate, however, requires complex thinking and social skills, and many different parts of the brain are involved. If brain injury impairs any of these skills, it can affect a person’s ability to communicate successfully.

Depending on the areas of the brain affected and the severity of the injury, many people experience more than one form of communication problem after brain injury. A person with brain injury may have speech that is difficult to understand, or a language problem which prevents them expressing their thoughts or finding the right words. They may have difficulty attending to what others are saying, processing information, organising their thoughts, or monitoring their own language. Many people encounter reading and writing difficulties following brain injury, with many people giving up reading altogether because it becomes such an arduous task.

These difficulties are often present alongside problems with memory, attention and concentration, fatigue, reduced insight, slowed speed of information processing, impaired planning and social skills, and aspects of behaviour such as ability to control impulses, empathise with others, or effectively recognise and adhere to the widely accepted ‘norms’ of social behaviour. As a result, a person may stand too close to others, interrupt or dominate conversations, say inappropriate things, constantly change topic, and/or be overly dogmatic or argumentative.

Conversation skill influences our ability to develop social relationships, maintain friendships and interact with family – all of which are strong predictors of and crucial to our wellbeing. Remembering that a person’s intellectual capacity may not have changed post injury, nor their memory of a previous life before disability, it would be quite understandable for ‘behaviours’ to manifest through the sheer frustration of not being able to convey a simple concept.

So, what can this mean for people living with brain injury? Particularly given that self-worth is largely derived from social interaction with others. And that social communication skills play such a key role in being successful in home life, at work or at school.

Imagine what it would be like to live in a world where you could not express what it is you want in any given situation.

Communication difficulty following brain injury may affect ability to get and maintain a job. It can impact on family relationships, and most likely will affect ability to keep existing friendships or to form new effective social working relationships. As relationships are altered and roles shift, stark contrasts in lifestyle before and after injury significantly impact the injured person, family members and friends. A life redefined by injury is an enormous shift, and in that transition, social isolation – an often unmeasured and unnoticed effect of brain injury – awaits.

The many problems people living with brain injury encounter is compounded by the community's lack of recognition and poor understanding of the impact a brain injury can have on individuals, families and society. Brain injury has a direct impact on suicide rates, petty and major crime rates, drug addiction, alcoholism, violence in the family home, and employment – along with impact on the social and political economy.

Whilst it can be argued that life today is better for some Tasmanians with brain injury and their families, there continue to be groups within this cohort that remain at risk of unnecessarily restrictive lifestyles, poor access to services and opportunities, and other serious inequities. Despite a prevalence rate in Tasmania that is higher than the national average, it remains a source of frustration that brain injury has barely made a dent on the public imagination, let alone on those structures, policies and practices that discriminate against and exclude people living with brain injury.

A greater source of frustration however is reactive political leaders who make short-sighted decisions, who do not address or even admit that problems exist. Political leaders who 'kick the can down the road' by, for example, building

new prisons and then filling them predominantly with people with brain injury, rather than addressing the reasons why people offend or re-offend.

What is it then that Tasmanians living with brain injury need?

At the service level, it is an integrated systemic response: re-accessible and coordinated services along the rehabilitation continuum. Collaborative state-wide service planning, and coordinated cross-government and inter-agency planning is pivotal. At the political level, political leaders who have a proactive approach to problem-solving, who believe that the first role of government is to prevent existing problems from getting worse or, more importantly, to stop them from occurring in the first place.



An aerial photograph of a city, likely Hobart, Tasmania. In the foreground, a tall, modern apartment building with a distinctive white, conical roof structure stands out. The background shows a dense residential area built on a hillside, with numerous houses and trees. The sky is clear and blue.

16

# Tassie Literacy: A Whole Lot Worse, Or Just a Little Bit?



# Tassie Literacy: A Whole Lot Worse, Or Just a Little Bit?

BY DEBORAH STROH-REILLY



Deborah Stroh-Reilly is currently President of the Tasmanian Council for Adult Literacy and STeP123 Literacy Project Coordinator for The Salvation Army, as well as working with community at the City of Hobart. She has worked in Canada and the UK in television production, horticulture, ski instructing and teaching English as a second language, to name a few.

Just the other day, I was speaking to a friend, who teaches at the university, about what I was doing on the weekend. It just so happened that I had attended the AGM for Tasmanian Council for Adult Literacy (TCAL), and was re-elected as the President for the second term. He was most interested in pursuing with me the subject of literacy in Tasmania. He firstly wanted to clarify whether Tasmania has a huge rate of illiteracy, which he had heard talk about, and secondly, are we worse off than the rest of Australia? So, I of course replied that yes, we do have a high rate of illiteracy, but as we all know, it's not really called 'illiteracy' anymore – we like to refer to 'literacy issues' or 'literacy needs' in a more politically correct world. He had heard about the infamous '48%' of Tasmanians with literacy issues, and my friend and I discussed what this really means. Does it mean that nearly half of Tasmanians can't read or write anything? To him, that would have been preposterous – and to all of us I'm sure! I explained that what it actually means is that 48% of Tasmanians are unable to operate at a functional level

I explained that what it actually means is that 48% of Tasmanians are unable to operate at a functional level in everyday aspects of life.

in everyday aspects of life such as reading a bus timetable, reading a legal document, working out utility bills, writing letters to the school, or filling out the myriad of school forms for their children. I could see how this piqued his interest and we talked further about how and why this could be.

We talked about the history of Tasmania over the past two hundred years. Is it so much worse here than the rest of Australia? It depends on your point of view, and trust in statistics – Tassie is about 1% worse off than the mainland – does that make us a whole lot worse, or just a little bit? He presented some ideas as to why literacy might be worse here, as compared to Victoria, for instance.

From around the mid-nineteenth century Tasmania's growth has been sluggish compared to the mainland. The gold rush in Victoria attracted a lot of ambitious people – it was an energising time for that state. Meanwhile, Tasmania had to cope with a large convict population and their descendants. It is easy to imagine that a large proportion of convict society was suspicious of education, which was mostly run by the educated elite who were miles apart in life's values and attitudes. This historical suspicion of formal education may have, in some ways, filtered down through the generations to today.

I could see his point, and there is plenty of anecdotal evidence out there in certain communities where parents and grandparents are very reluctant to have their descendants 'do better' than they have. In some parts of Tasmania, it is a rare child who will go to university or have aspirations beyond what their parents did (or didn't do) at school.

And this is where community service providers – not-for-profit organisations, community groups, family support workers – can be chipping away at this mindset. I have seen some changes in the literacy workshops that I have been running in the community for The Salvation Army. I have seen teenagers keen as mustard to get educated, and the parents holding them back. But I have seen great motivation for people to start learning again, and be proud of their educational achievements – like the women who received a Cert I in Community Services, or a Cert I in Hospitality. The mother who started her own cake-making business after attending literacy/cooking classes. I have seen incredible resilience in areas where there are no more jobs at the sawmill, and the 40-year-old worker realises he's out of a job and had better start learning how to read and write for his next job application. There is so much more we can do, and we need to keep doing it – and we need to keep the funding coming in to continue this great work in the community. We need money spenders with vision and insight into the literacy needs of our state; we need influential leaders of the community and within governments to change the mindset of our communities.



*Something to think about: How can we all help change the mindset, one step at a time?*

17

# Reading Your Way Out of Crime







## Reading Your Way Out of Crime

BY DON MCCRAE

Don McCrae is a criminologist and founding member of JusTas in Tasmania. Don has established, operated and currently manages prison reintegration programs and housing/homelessness programs with the Salvation Army. He is also a research officer with the University of Tasmania.

It has been long recognised that many people cycling through the Tasmanian Prison Service have low literacy rates. There are many people better placed than me to speak to the benefits of lifting literacy levels with this cohort, but I would like to share a story of someone I worked with for a number of years.

I first met Matty in Bethlehem House when he was a resident and I was working on a pilot program for people exiting prison on parole. Matty and I used to pass in the corridor and say 'Hi' and on the few times we sat and spoke I found his speech very difficult to understand – fast paced and slurred. Deciphering the way through a conversation and understanding most of it was a challenge. I incorrectly assumed back then that Matty had a mild intellectual disability because he had difficulty finding his words and enunciating them.

As I got to know Matty better, he told me his story; not an unusual one, but nevertheless his story that told of lifelong exposure to trauma, disadvantage and crime.

Matty was first diagnosed with ADHD when he was four and to his mother's relief was prescribed Ritalin shortly after. Matty later confided in me that his

mother took more of his medication than he did. He never engaged at school and was largely left out of mainstream learning as he was labelled the ‘naughty kid’. He spent much of his academic life standing facing the corner in a vain attempt to make him learn the error of his ways.

Matty first found his ‘family’ at the age of thirteen when he was expelled from school and spent his days hanging out with his friends on their BMX bikes at the local shopping centre. There he began to learn the value of petty shoplifting when trying to impress his friends. He soon realised that he wasn’t that good at it and always managed to be the kid that the security guy caught while all his friends scarpered.

It was in this manner that Matty began his engagement with the authorities and he extended this relationship via many more shoplifting episodes, eventually graduating to burglaries with the obligatory possession of stolen goods and drugs; all fun and games until he crossed the threshold of adulthood and was sent to the ‘big house’ following an attempted armed robbery.

By the time I met Matty at Bethlehem House he had spent three laggings in Risdon prison which were about as useful for his rehabilitation as the hours he spent standing in the ‘naughty corner’ at school.

He had been diagnosed with schizophrenia and was heavily medicated as a result, which accounted for his slurred speech and difficulties in communicating.

We sat down one day and developed a case plan with a set of achievable goals. One of those goals was to learn how to read as he said that he had never read anything – though he used to avidly scan the pictures in the newspaper every day. We engaged with some adult literacy classes, but he didn’t last very long as he found it too hard to keep his mind from racing.

I attended a GP appointment with Matty one day and we spoke about his childhood diagnosis of ADHD and whether this was something that may have implications for him still. His doctor felt it unlikely but provided a referral to see a psychiatrist.

Two weeks later, I sat with Matty while he nervously twitched in a seat at the specialist clinic. The longer we waited, the more anxious he became, and I wondered if he would last until his appointment. When we went in – he had

**This was the turning point for Matty.  
At last someone had listened to  
his story!**

asked me previously to be there with him – the doctor looked through a few notes, gave a casual glance over his half-moon glasses at Matty’s tattoos and you could see that he had made his diagnosis at first sight – ‘junkie’. He said there was nothing he could really do, wrote out a prescription for Valium, and suggested Matty return to his GP for any ongoing matters.

We had hit a dead end.

As the doctor handed the prescription across the desk, I stood to leave, but Matty sat in his chair and said, ‘You are my last chance mate’.

He spent the next fifteen minutes pouring out his story while the doctor listened; first with annoyance and then with more interest as the story unfolded. Matty came away with a script for a low dose of Ritalin that he would have to pick up on a daily basis with highly restricted protocols – and a return appointment to see the psychiatrist. He was slowly weaned off his existing medication and was referred to a psychologist for a mental health care plan to monitor his change in medication regime.

This was the turning point for Matty. At last someone had listened to his story!

The first thing we noticed was his speech; it was slower, with better pronunciation, and there was no dribble down his chin.

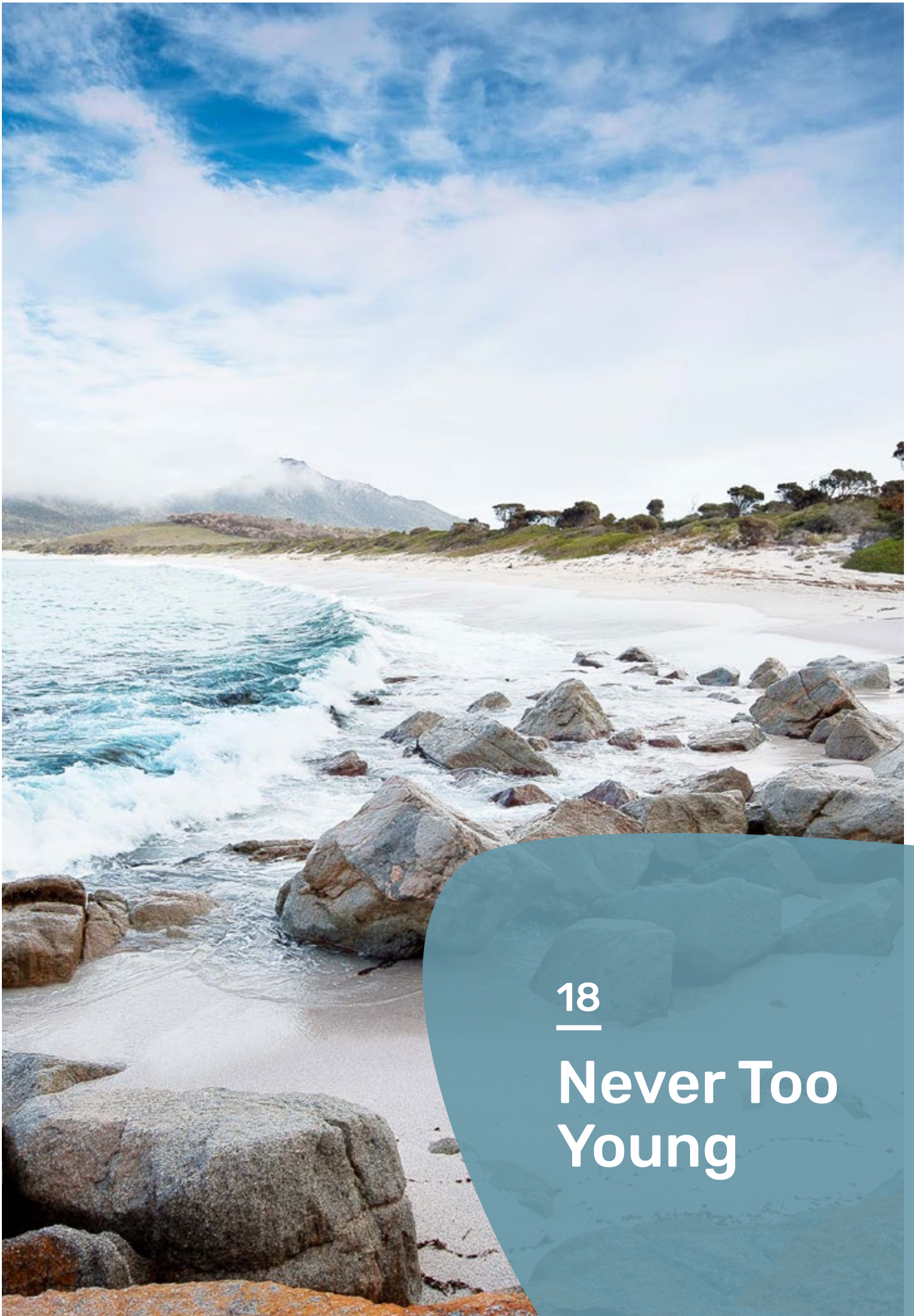
This time when Matty attended adult literacy classes he was able to engage and understand the lessons much better than he did previously. His relationship with his parole officer improved and he started reading the paper every day rather than just looking at the pictures.

Soon after, he found work on a building site as a labourer and we lost touch, until about six months later he dropped in.

His employer had supported him to attend TAFE where he was undertaking a certificate qualification in building and construction and was renting a house with a friend. He said that he was even reading books now and had been prescribed glasses, further highlighting a previously overlooked issue. He related to me that he had never been able to understand how people could read a book and get lost in the story. This had happened to him for the first time in his life and he was reading every day and had become a member of the library.

Since finishing his parole, Matty has never been charged with any further offences. With assistance and good management, he has desisted in any use of non-prescription medication. He says that he never even smokes pot anymore, once a daily pastime, because it interferes with his reading.





18

# Never Too Young



## Never Too Young

BY FIONA FORSYTH

Fiona Forsyth has been a Launching into Learning teacher for the last 8 years. She brings to the role over 20 years of Early Years teaching experience, supporting young children and their families in low socio-economic communities.

‘Twinkle Twinkle Little Star .....’ the sweet gentle tones of the Launching into Learning, Play and Learn parent group singing to their babies, wafted through the air. The rhyme, rhythm and sounds of language, soothing to the babies’ ears, expressed by smiles and babbles. Babies making eye contact with their mums while being cradled in their laps, building that special parent–child bond.

I scanned this nurturing scene and noticed that one of the parents was not involved, instead she was rolling her eyes and shaking her head. I asked myself why and came to what I thought was the obvious conclusion – that singing in a group situation was way out of her comfort zone.

I made the decision to change focus and started reading to the group instead. ‘Where is the green sheep?’ I asked, holding up the very popular picture book. I was confident that this text full of repetition and anticipation would engage all parents, babies and toddlers. Squeals of excitement, cheerful responses and claps of delight occurred throughout the story, again everyone was connected except the mum who I had assumed was not so confident. As I looked up from the text, I saw her stand up and walk away from our group.

I learnt to recognise the barriers that our parents face in supporting their children – including the fear of learning, fear of failure, and lack of confidence in their own literacy abilities.

Never one to give up, full of hope and determination in reaching out to parents, I thought that because the group situation was indeed overwhelming, that this mum was feeling very uncomfortable. Maybe due to her own difficulties? Possibly with literacy. So, I led the group out into our community garden.

Here we could just enjoy the experience of harvesting vegetables together, share conversations, and foster curiosity with the little ones. This was also an opportunity to seek out the disengaged mum and her baby, have a one-on-one chat, listen to her story and start to build a trusting relationship.

I wanted to discover what her concerns may be, and how I could help and offer support. But before I had the chance, she called out loudly to the group, 'This is so @#!% stupid! What's the point of talking to my baby when he can't talk back.'

I was shocked and surprised by what she had said and truly believed. Despite all my attempts over many weeks to make contact I never saw her or baby again.

This mum's parting comment never left my mind and became a driving force behind my early years literacy program. She helped me have a deeper understanding about the significant part within my teaching role to support and empower parents with the crucial role of talking, singing and reading to their young child.

I learnt to recognise the barriers that our parents face in supporting their children – including the fear of learning, fear of failure, and lack of confidence in their own literacy abilities.

She taught me about being kind and offering the hand of friendship particularly when being faced with challenging behaviour. To be a good listener, to show empathy and the willingness to ‘walk a mile in my shoes’ without judgment. I became a better teacher and a better person from our brief interaction.

I discovered that the mum who walked away from our Launching into Learning group has her son enrolled in our Kindergarten class this year. His teacher has reported that he will need speech therapy, and many opportunities to expand his oral vocabulary – and that he particularly loves singing and story time!

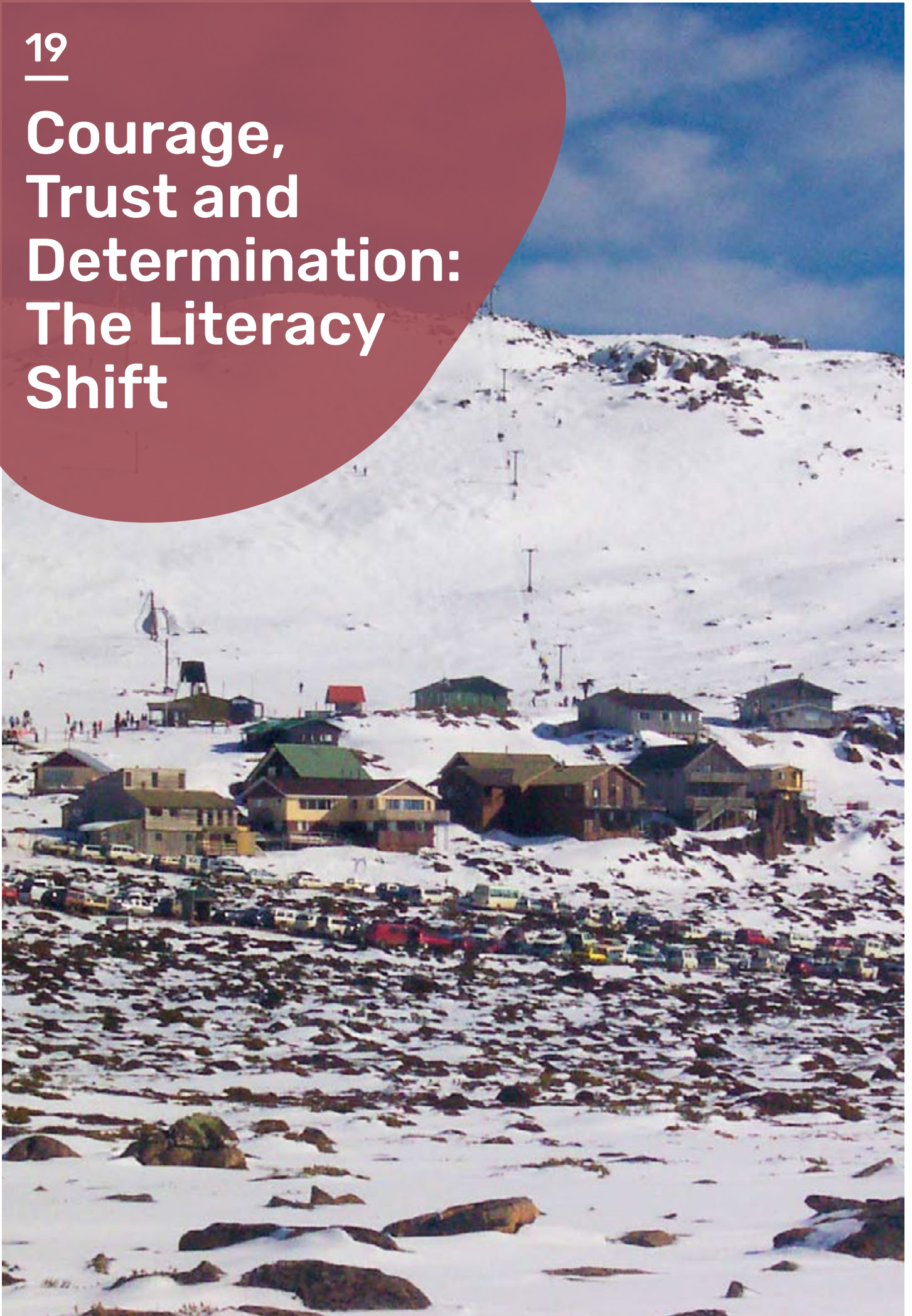


*Something to think about: When faced with a behaviour that challenges your norm would you judge and turn your back or stay and try to understand?*



19

# Courage, Trust and Determination: The Literacy Shift





# Courage, Trust and Determination: The Literacy Shift

BY DR FRANCES WILLIAMSON

Dr Frances Williamson is a researcher with the University of New England, currently involved in a longitudinal study investigating the impacts of an Aboriginal adult literacy campaign on health and wellbeing in remote communities of north-western NSW. Prior to this, Frances has worked variously as a project officer with the Literacy for Life Foundation, supporting Aboriginal communities to address the issue of low adult literacy and as an English language teacher. She has recently moved to Southern Tasmania, where she lives with her family and assorted animals.

It's brutally hot. A large, noisy fan propels loose papers back and forth across the floor. Every now and again the metal door clangs violently shut and a lazy dog stirs from his place in front of the whiteboard. Eleven students are ready, pencil in hand, for the start of another lesson. Today, we tackle the soft 'c'.

'I know a hard 'c' word' one student calls out, 'but it's not nice to say'.

Others laugh before someone yells shut up.

There are grandmothers and grandsons,  
mothers and daughters, sisters and cousins  
all overcoming their shame to return to basics:  
penmanship, vowels, consonants, full stops.

Later in the day, the whiteboard has two columns of words written in a large, careful script, the target letter underlined in red: incarcerated, peace, civil, chance. Above the columns in capitals is the day's positive message: PEOPLE LOVE PEACE.

It's a literacy class, yes, but unlike any I've encountered before. For one thing, I'm not the teacher. Here the students are Aboriginal adults – people who found themselves left behind by the formal education system, people who experience the complex legacy of colonisation every day of their lives. The students range in age from 17 to 67. There are grandmothers and grandsons, mothers and daughters, sisters and cousins all overcoming their shame to return to basics: penmanship, vowels, consonants, full stops.

The courage to walk through the door comes from the staff. Their teachers have no formal teaching qualifications. In fact, for some, the literacy campaign is their first real job. But these staff hold the only qualification that counts out here: they're local; neighbours, aunties, friends who themselves have struggled with reading and writing and are learning on the job alongside the students – their mob.

'It works because it's us doing it for us,' I hear time and again. A literacy campaign requires collaboration at a community level. It starts with acknowledgement of the issue of low literacy and a determination to address it. Then, through a series of meetings and events involving the local medical service, schools, the Land Council and the Shire Council, the community slowly mobilises and a small team with dedicated supporters forms. Months of intensive training, planning and consultation follow before the door to the classroom finally opens.



If it takes a community to raise a child, it takes a society to turn an adult's life around. Out in these small rural communities in north-western NSW, adult literacy, like the pastoral industry, has been all but forgotten. The well-publicised and documented disadvantage in these mostly Aboriginal communities has attracted significant resources in the form of welfare agencies, justice and policing, health services and branches of countless government departments. And yet, seldom are questions asked about why so many are before the court for driving without a licence, why so many are in breach of their Centrelink conditions, why so many have fines accruing and why so many live without stable accommodation.

The answer to these questions – low adult literacy – seems hidden in plain sight. The ability to navigate increasingly complex bureaucratic systems and to sift and grade the barrage of text-based information is currently beyond an estimated 40% of Aboriginal adults.

Low literacy stands between many and their health, housing, money, and kids' futures. It can even make the difference between incarceration and freedom.

Literacy then is at the heart of people regaining control of their lives. For those of us working on the campaign from outside the community, our job is the reverse. We as literacy teachers, community developers, activists and academics need to relinquish control so that the staff, students and community can take control. This shift demands courage, trust and determination from everyone.

Once the first group of students walk through the door, I step away from the whiteboard. The class can and does unravel from time to time but increasingly, the staff and students come forward, supporting each other to find solutions.

This is grassroots literacy: slow, deep and long lasting.





20

## Dispense the Mystery



## Dispense the Mystery

BY DR GEOFF DONEGAN

Dr Geoff Donegan is a consultant paediatrician who focuses on helping children with complex cognitive and neuro-behavioural difficulties. He works in private practice and at the Royal Hobart Hospital.

**M**y hands and feet started shaking at the mention of the headmaster's office. This became a quivering in my chest and constriction in my throat during the short walk there.

In his office was another teacher I had never met. I wasn't in trouble, but the next 10 minutes were perplexing, mysterious, even bizarre. I was asked to do some 'exercises.' Closing one eye, then the other, reaching for objects, moving around the room. They nodded to each other, repeated some opaque phrases, reviewed their notes, reached a concealed consensus then dismissed me back to class.

This confusing and stressful event was never mentioned again.

My suspicion that it had to do with my 'worst in the class' spelling was never confirmed. There were no pedagogical changes in class and I continued memorising my spelling lists for 40 minutes a night only to forget them 24 hours later.

Even now I can't spell I remain unsure if 'uncle' really shouldn't have a 'k' instead. While I can easily read any individual word, a full page of text remains daunting. Spellcheck, Dragon and Grammarly are my writing buddies.

For the first time he understood why he struggled, that he was not just stupid and there was hope for the future.

I see my experiences reflected in hundreds of schoolkids I have worked with who struggle to spell, read or write – they feel bewildered, frustrated, discouraged and a disappointment to home and school. Worse, they feel very much alone, as I did 40 years ago.

Dave was 10 when, with excitement and fire in his eyes, he told me he was going to be an Emergency Department Nurse (he had discovered the old TV series ‘ER’ on YouTube!). Two years later his plans soured after deeply disappointing Year 5 and 6 school reports – ‘that’s too hard – you have to be really smart’ he told me.

Three months later, cognitive testing revealed a very bright kid with literacy skills a year behind his peers and two years below where they should have been. School started extra literacy support but he was now disengaged, angry and rejecting of help. With antagonism crossing over into the home and Year 7 becoming a train wreck, we looked for a different approach.

I spent about 2 hours over a few weeks going through the cognitive testing with Dave and explaining what dyslexia was and was not. For the first time he understood why he struggled, that he was not just stupid and there was hope for the future. He engaged with the education plans rather than fight against them. With extensive support and lots of hard work, Dave’s school reports improved every year until in late 2017 he achieved an ATAR of 88. Now, in 2018, he is following his childhood dream and has begun his Bachelor of Nursing.

Guiding our children through the complexities of neuro-developmental conditions, physical health problems or even adolescent existential angst is daunting but not impossible. Necessary conditions for progress are respect for children’s autonomy and self-efficacy, humility that no single person has all the answers and willingness to spend time and be accountable to both parents and child.



The rationale, process and consequences are straightforward: first acknowledge there is a problem and give it a name rather than perpetuate a transparent sham that everything is OK. Confirm that the problem is common and well understood, countering the recurrent feelings of isolation and hopelessness. Gather a team, including child and parents, and articulate a clear, structured plan with measurable goals promoting confidence and accountability.

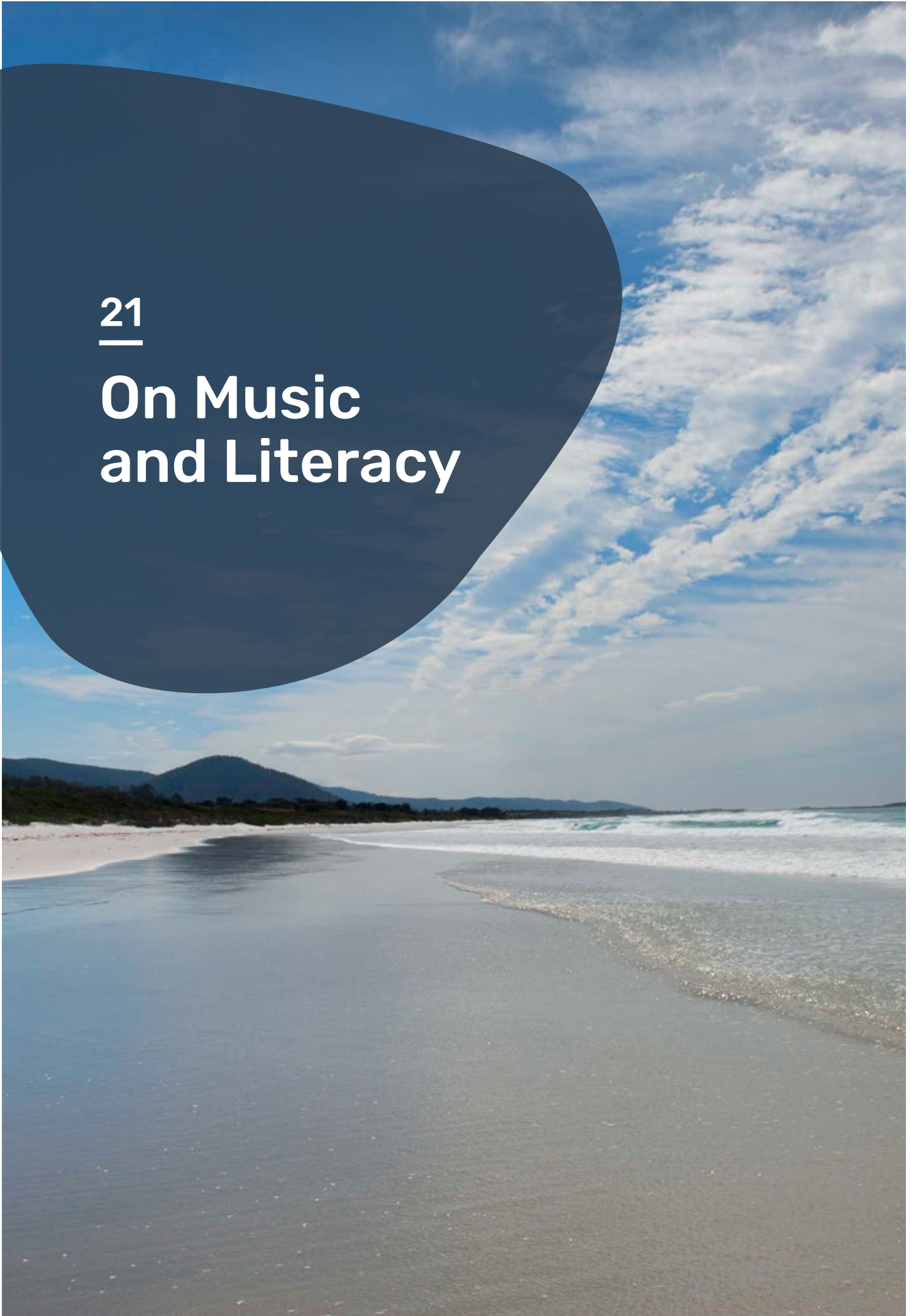
Knowledge, openness and hard work won't solve all our problems and endlessly buttress self-esteem; but denial, avoiding 'labels' and/or obfuscation induces fear, erodes self-efficacy and damages our children.

Long ago we stopped lying to children about serious health problems: it is time we became more open and honest about neuro-developmental conditions like dyslexia and other learning difficulties.



21

# On Music and Literacy





## On Music and Literacy

BY DR GLEN HODGES

Dr Glen Hodges is Coordinator of Contemporary Guitar at the University of Tasmania and acting Head of Jazz and Popular Music Performance. In an extended tertiary career, he has received a number of awards for teaching, program design and management.

**W**hile it is now some considerable time ago, I do not ever remember finding reading difficult. In fact, I was voracious, often consuming paperbacks in a day and a night (albeit, often a late night – using torchlight!).

One of the reasons for this appetite may have been that as a bit of a loner in a family without television, books enabled my engagement with a wider and more exciting world. I was especially grateful for a lovely pair of elderly sisters who lived next door and generously offered an enticing library of classic literature that fed my appetite. As a result, I also never really found speaking difficult and had a vocabulary years above my age for most of my childhood.

I did, however, struggle to write. In high school, each year I read all the required texts by week two but could not compose a credible essay. The frustration with writing exercises that didn't seem to connect with the inspirational material I had been consuming was debilitating. At the end of Year 12 my headmaster said to me, in a surprisingly kind tone, 'Glen, with the current high school assessment system, technically it's impossible to fail ... but somehow you've managed!' It wasn't until years later, as a TAFE and then university student, that I bit the bullet and gradually acquired the self-discipline needed to learn and apply those skills.

Now, as a jazz musician within a university setting who hopes to assist students with the ‘literacy’ of music as well as textual literacy, my personal and professional experience leads me to offer some observations.

In the introduction to my PhD thesis I noted that ‘Comparisons of musical statements with components of language, while fraught with difficulties, are sometimes useful for describing conceptual ideas.’ The noted jazz researcher, Paul Berliner states of his book *Thinking in Jazz* that ‘the presentation of material [in the book] emphasizes the aural absorption of jazz before the study of music theory’ and that this was ‘In accord with this work’s view of jazz as a language’.

This idea, that theory should explicate practice rather than dictate it, is central to many improvising musicians’ conceptual frameworks. That the title of the *Chatter Matters* symposium should begin with the word ‘communication’ suggests that there are aspects of crossover which are important to consider, and which may give some insights into textual literacy issues.

In the Cambridge Dictionary, literacy is defined firstly as ‘the ability to read and write’ but if we combine this with the second definition provided, that it is, ‘knowledge of a particular subject, or a particular type of knowledge’ then the statement on the Australian Curriculum website concerning literacy has considerably deeper significance.

*Literacy encompasses the knowledge and skills students need to access, understand, analyse and evaluate information, make meaning, express thoughts and emotions, present ideas and opinions, interact with others and participate in activities at school and in their lives beyond school. Success in any learning area depends on being able to use the significant, identifiable and distinctive literacy that is important for learning and representative of the content of that learning area.*

australiancurriculum.edu.au

In my field I often define the first level of literacy for musicians as ‘being able to write what you hear and hear what you write’. But this definition, which focuses on the notational aspect, doesn’t effectively or fully incorporate the creative artist’s experience.

For the practising musician the issue indeed broadens to be one of communication. For true communication (as opposed to ‘reiteration’) there must be a deeper level of learning. This learning develops an organic conceptual framework and doesn’t (as often happens in music tuition) dictate the practice with a constricting set of rules that may arguably enable the construction of a scholarly archetype but that precludes originality and profundity.

For students to be convinced of the need for literacy skills of any level they need to see how these skills connect to the creative aspect of their experience – which is often highly developed. Most young people have things they want to express – creative, imaginative, original ideas that are just itching to be released – but we must model for them the connections that will enable them to achieve this.

In the music field this means moving beyond the deification of supposed theoretical and notational norms and finding ways to inspire students by demonstrating the link between their creativity and the skills that will enable them to communicate this. I suspect sometimes in textual literacy too, there has been a tendency to get bogged down in the means rather than pointing to the end. Students in these environments often tend to wonder whether their teachers care more about the words than the story. Both are important, but the connection needs to be made explicit and alluring.

We have found in music that it is no longer sufficient to say to the student ‘here is the medicine, just take it!’ We must provide some sugar and that is often best achieved by demonstrating how these skills are applied to what they want to create. Such thinking should challenge the belief that ‘Those who can’t do, teach.’

To equip students in any field, educators need to be the kind of mentors who can model how ‘literacy’ is useful and how it can be applied to the aspiration of inspiring and creative communication.

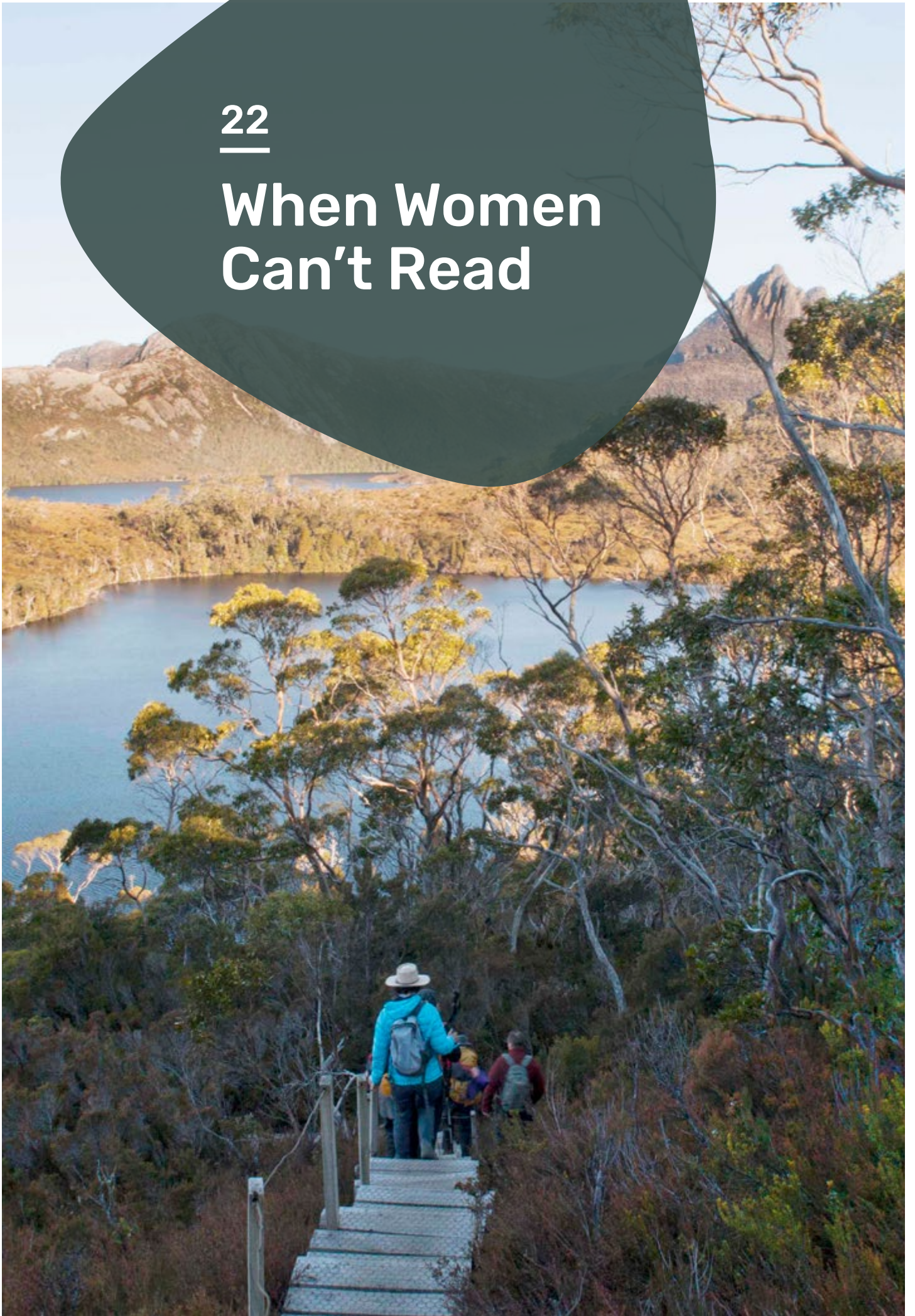


*Something to think about: How can we better connect aspirational goals with skill development to motivate the engagement with literacies?*



22

# When Women Can't Read







# When Women Can't Read

BY GRACE WILLIAMS

Grace Williams is the founder of human rights advocacy group 'Citizen'. She is a writer and a student of law, politics, economics and philosophy.

I am the first in my family's line of women to win an English literature prize. I am the first to quote Shakespeare in conversations and the first girl child to own a library. This is very isolating. As a reading woman I defy every barrier that was placed in front of my grandmother and all the women who have gone before her. I can read, write and freely articulate my thoughts in a 'man's world'. This makes me the wildest dream of my female ancestors. What separates me from my female ancestors who couldn't read or write is opportunity.

My favourite philosopher and economist Amartya Sen writes 'Poverty is not just a lack of money; it is not having the capability to realize one's full potential as a human being.'

Although my grandmother had wealth, she was denied access to the education which would have enabled her to reach her full potential. My grandmother was born in a patriarchal West African society. The political and social institutions of the day deprived women of the right to an education because, in their view, it wasn't important for a woman's wellbeing. This social and political oppression is present in many cultures around the world.

I grew up in Australia which has different ideas about what is good for women. For many of us lucky women in the western world, we roll our eyes at the thought of someone trying to stop us from getting an education. Being in

the 'eye roller' category of life is very conflicting for me. The times of my grandmother were a destitute intellectual wasteland for women. Those times still exist today. Although I am blessed to live in a time where political and social institutions enable me to reach my highest potential, I can't help but think, 'What about the other women?'

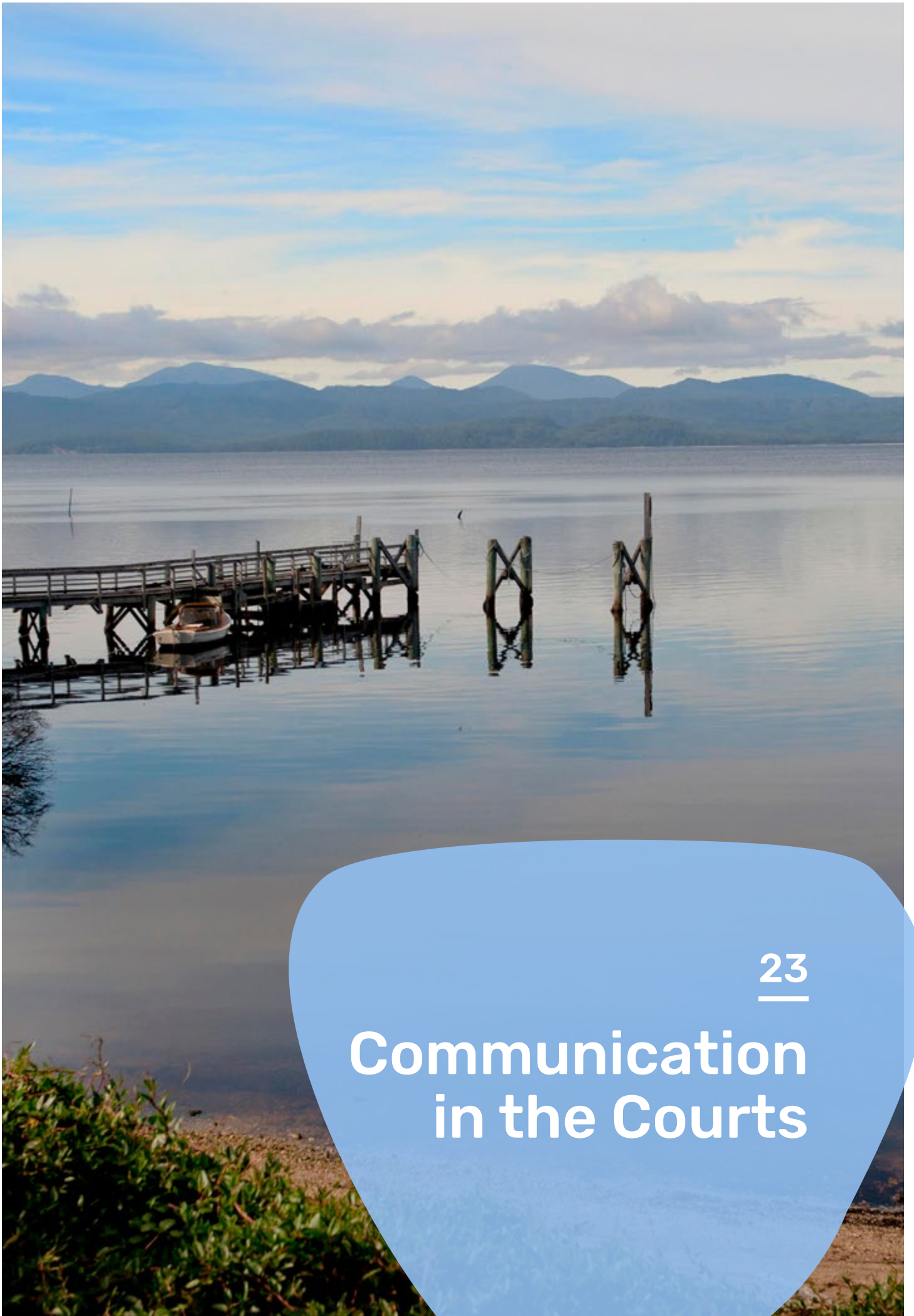
When I won this English literature prize as a 17-year-old girl from a refugee background, I and my parents felt so proud. My mother gave me one of her best lines, 'African girl, speaking their language'. It felt great! But winning didn't mean that I was more special than the other women in my family. I am not special for winning a prize. I believe my grandmother would have won ten prizes. She was notoriously clever. The rumour going around our family was that if she ever got the chance to read and write she would fight for human rights and probably run half of Sierra Leone.

It is our institutions that are special – for creating an environment in which I could happen. An environment where a young woman can grow to be a fully functioning adult, exercising her civil and political rights. I could never write this piece without those institutions giving me the opportunity to enhance my ability to communicate. Unlike so many people, including 48% of Tasmanians 'who do not have written language skills at a high enough level to manage the comprehension and self-expression demands of daily life', I have the gift of reading for pleasure and the ability to communicate my thoughts in writing.

What saddens me the most is that I'm not communicating to the audience I come from, an audience whose primary experience of the world is discrimination, and socio-economic disadvantage. Some of my friends cannot currently appreciate a good novel. The barriers that besieged my grandmother are still very present for many Tasmanians. These barriers must be identified and removed for the betterment of all Tasmanians. Communicating the heart of literacy is about the empowerment of the oppressed. It is about realising that each one of us was not just made to survive, we were made to thrive, and literacy is a means to our collective thriving.



*Something to think about: What barriers do Tasmanians face when it comes to literacy?*



23  
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# Communication in the Courts





# Communication in the Courts

BY GREG BARNES

Greg Barnes is a barrister, chair of the Prisoners Legal Service in Tasmania, and a former National president of the Australian Lawyers Alliance.

Every day around Tasmania hundreds of men, women and children appear in our courts. For most the experience is intimidating and stressful. In part this is because of the possible outcomes, but also by virtue of the fact that the language used in, and by, our legal system is difficult to comprehend even for well-educated citizens.

Many of the clients I represent and work with in the criminal justice system and the broader human rights framework struggle with literacy. Yes, some might be able to read, write and understand at a fairly basic level but legal documents and the way in which lawyers, judges and magistrates write and speak is exceedingly difficult to understand.

On many occasions after a person has been dealt with by a court they will look at their lawyer – and it has happened to me more times than I care to remember – and say, ‘what happened?’ This should not be the case.

The situation is even more outrageous if you are a self-represented litigant. On many occasions I have sat in courts in Tasmania and Victoria and seen a man or woman stand at the bar table and have to answer questions from the bench or be given documents and asked to read them. In many of those cases the person will be struggling with literacy.

On many occasions after a person has been dealt with by a court they will look at their lawyer – and it has happened to me more times than I care to remember – and say, ‘what happened?’ This should not be the case.

Access to justice is a fundamental human right but access must not just mean a citizen is able to appear before a court to argue their claim or defend themselves against allegations. Instead access to justice only has meaning in a substantive sense if the citizen is participating in the legal process in a manner that is knowing.

Whether it is criminal law, family law or civil law the reality is that if you are one of the 48% of Tasmanians with a literacy issue then participating in the legal system is going to be difficult, frustrating and more stressful than it already is by its very nature.

We ask our clients to read over legal documents in their case. In fact, it is a requirement for a lawyer to do so. But how can those, even with functional literacy, properly comprehend what is on the page in front of them given the technical language, long sentences and references to archaic English words and phrases?

Simple, they cannot.

So how do we address this endemic problem of lack of meaningful access to justice for those living with the daily challenge of a low level of literacy?

A good start would be for the courts to work in partnership with each other – federal and state – and develop a culture of clear and simple communication. Each court should have available support workers whose job it is to assist any person who requires support in the court or in accessing justice through filling out legal forms.

Importantly, we need to skill lawyers and judicial officers in literacy and communication. In California there is now a guide for judges to help them recognise low literacy and then use techniques to address it. To address low literacy in the courtroom, the Californian Benchbook recommends firstly that judges and lawyers need to ‘be aware of their own biases relating to low literacy and remember – low literacy does not equal low intelligence’. It recommends judges use ‘plain language’ instead of ‘legalese’, use ‘short sentences and clear language’, use words consistently, use ‘the active voice’, and avoid ‘strings of infinitives’ such as ‘authorise’ and ‘empower’.

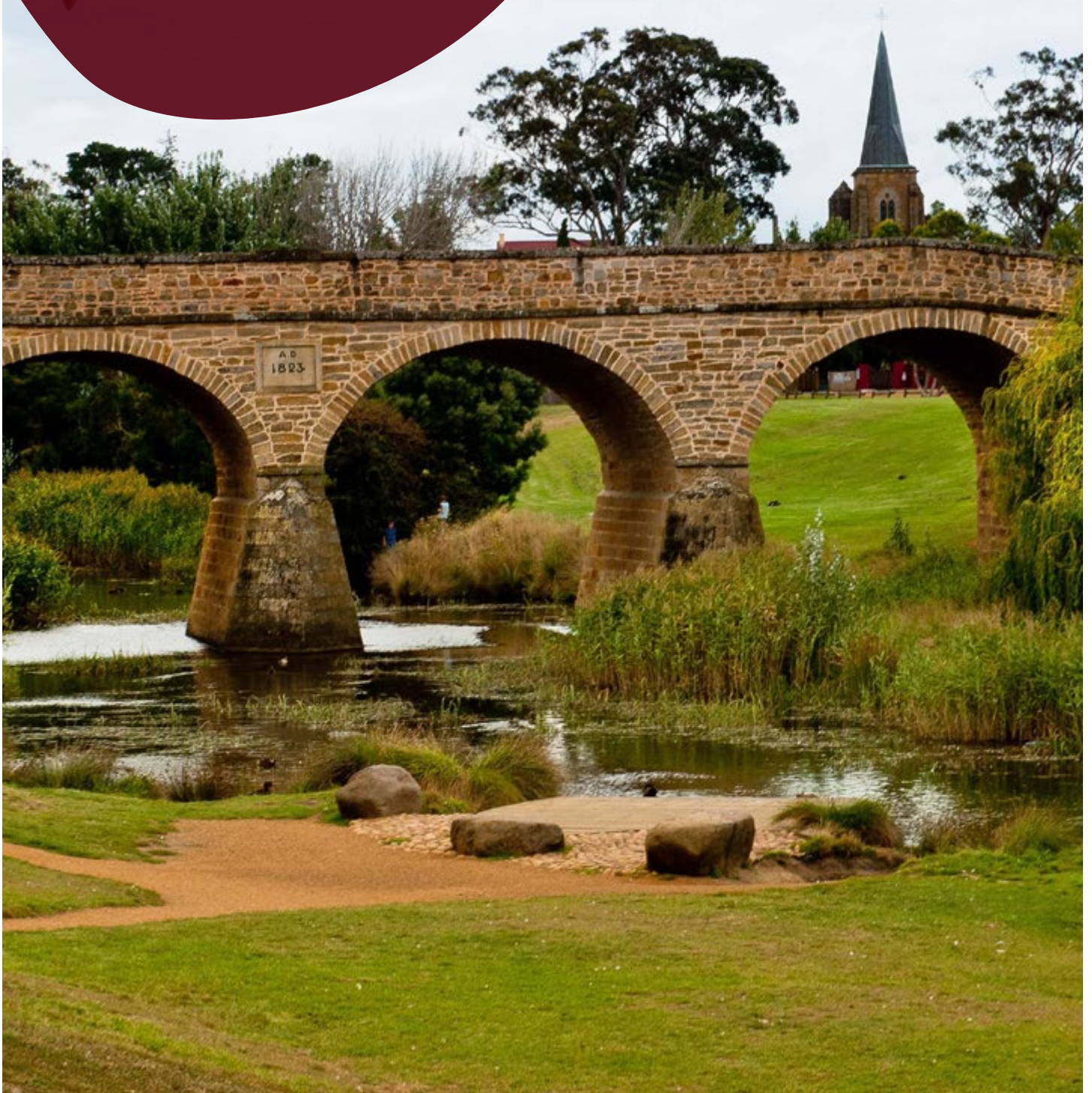
Legal training, right from the first day aspiring lawyers turn up at law school, should emphasise plain English, nonverbal skills and communication. Learning how to assess for literacy in clients and users of the court system must be in the toolkit of the 21st century lawyer.

Citizens with low levels of literacy should not be subjected to daily discrimination in our court system. We have, as a community, an obligation to invest in ensuring that barriers to those with literacy challenges are removed.



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# You Need English







## You Need English

BY HEATHER ROSE

Heather Rose writes for both children and adults and is published internationally. Her novels include the Tuesday McGillicuddy children's series written under the pen name Angelica Banks with co-author Danielle Wood. Her latest novel for adults, *The Museum of Modern Love*, won the 2017 Stella Prize, Christina Stead Prize, Margaret Scott Prize and the Tasmanian People's Choice Award. Heather is also the mother of three children.

In my role as a children's author, I have had the privilege of visiting a number of Tasmanian schools. I am always powerfully impressed by the quality of the teachers inspiring the young people in their charge. I am also dismayed at the stories I find in those classrooms. We have known for a long time that smaller class sizes and a higher student-to-teacher ratio delivers better learning outcomes. Yet at so many Tasmanian schools I find class sizes at around 30 – and sometimes larger.

It is also evident, in every classroom, that many children are in need of special care and assistance. Many are on the autism spectrum and have already been told they have learning difficulties. However very few of these children qualify for formal assistance by way of teacher aides.

Our classrooms are also full of children who have been in long daycare since a very early age. While child care centres are working to make early learning a priority, they too struggle with child-adult ratios. Many children, by the time they arrive at kindergarten, cannot sit still, concentrate on a given task, comply

with instructions, and have not discovered the quiet pleasures of books and art. Some are still not toilet trained.

Our teachers are somehow expected to maintain discipline in a large classroom of small children with all this complexity.

Almost 50% of Tasmanians are deemed functionally illiterate. Nationally that figure is 20%. One in five people is bad enough. But one in two? This is beyond a tragedy. It is a hypocrisy.

More than 20 years ago the reading curriculum was based on phonics. Children were taught how to sound words out. It was abandoned for an early years curriculum where children are expected to simply pick up reading by being in the environment of words and books. It has been a spectacular failure. And Tasmanian children have suffered more than most.

Illiteracy affects every area of life. From navigating our health system to our legal system, from government departments to employment, from relationships to parenting and so on. And why has this happened? Beyond the disciplinary challenges the modern school-aged child presents, we have a failure in the reading curriculum.

Some children learn by sounding out, some children learn by a whole word approach, some by lists, and many need all of the above. All of that takes time and dedication. The current curriculum is too crowded and teachers have trouble fitting all the requirements into a week.

Half our children leave school without confident reading skills. That's akin to telling them they might as well forget their dreams. It's akin to failing to tell them that in winter you need to dress warmly, and that sex leads to pregnancy. Reading is absolutely basic to human life. Many, many teachers have witnessed this failure in the curriculum. But still nothing has been done to address this issue by government after government.

Thanks to NAPLAN and other flawed government initiatives, we have also lost specialist librarians, music and art teachers. Yet we know that children all learn differently. For some of them music is the medium that will help their brains grasp reading and maths. For others it's art. For some students, it's the guidance of a great librarian who will stretch them into new books and ideas.

Almost 50% of Tasmanians are deemed functionally illiterate. Nationally that figure is 20%. One in five people is bad enough. But one in two? This is beyond a tragedy. It is a hypocrisy.

Music, art and librarians are not luxuries in schools. They are fundamental to enriching the mind. They inspire children to become life-long learners. Our numeracy and literacy rates in Tasmania are the second worst in Australia. Beyond ensuring that we have a curriculum that actually teaches every child to read, we need to seriously look at enrichment.

Good food at both breakfast and lunch for every child would also make a powerful difference in our educational outcomes in this state. Thirty% of Tasmanian families live below the poverty line. The hungry child, the poorly nourished child, is unable to concentrate, and is a disruption to other children. Some Tasmanian schools have a breakfast program. None of them has a lunch program.

We have just re-elected a government that is determined to ensure our poor suburbs become poorer in the wake of extended gambling licences. The people who will bear the brunt of that will be the children. Given the flow-on effect of Tasmanians losing some \$200 million a year to poker machines, it is almost certain our education outcomes will worsen in this state over the next 25 years. That may not particularly worry this government because less-educated people tend to vote for more right-wing politicians. But it should seriously worry every parent.

The government wants to amalgamate colleges and high schools to stop the flood of Year 10 leavers. But it's no wonder so many students want to leave in Year 10. It must be a form of torture to expect a child to continue their education when they lack basic reading skills.

## Reading is history but it is also currency

I am passionate about reading. I spent the majority of my education in the Tasmanian public school system. I recall well the teachers of my early years insisting we *sound it out*. *Sound it out!* And we did. We learned to be proficient readers. My primary school was also a small school with small class sizes.

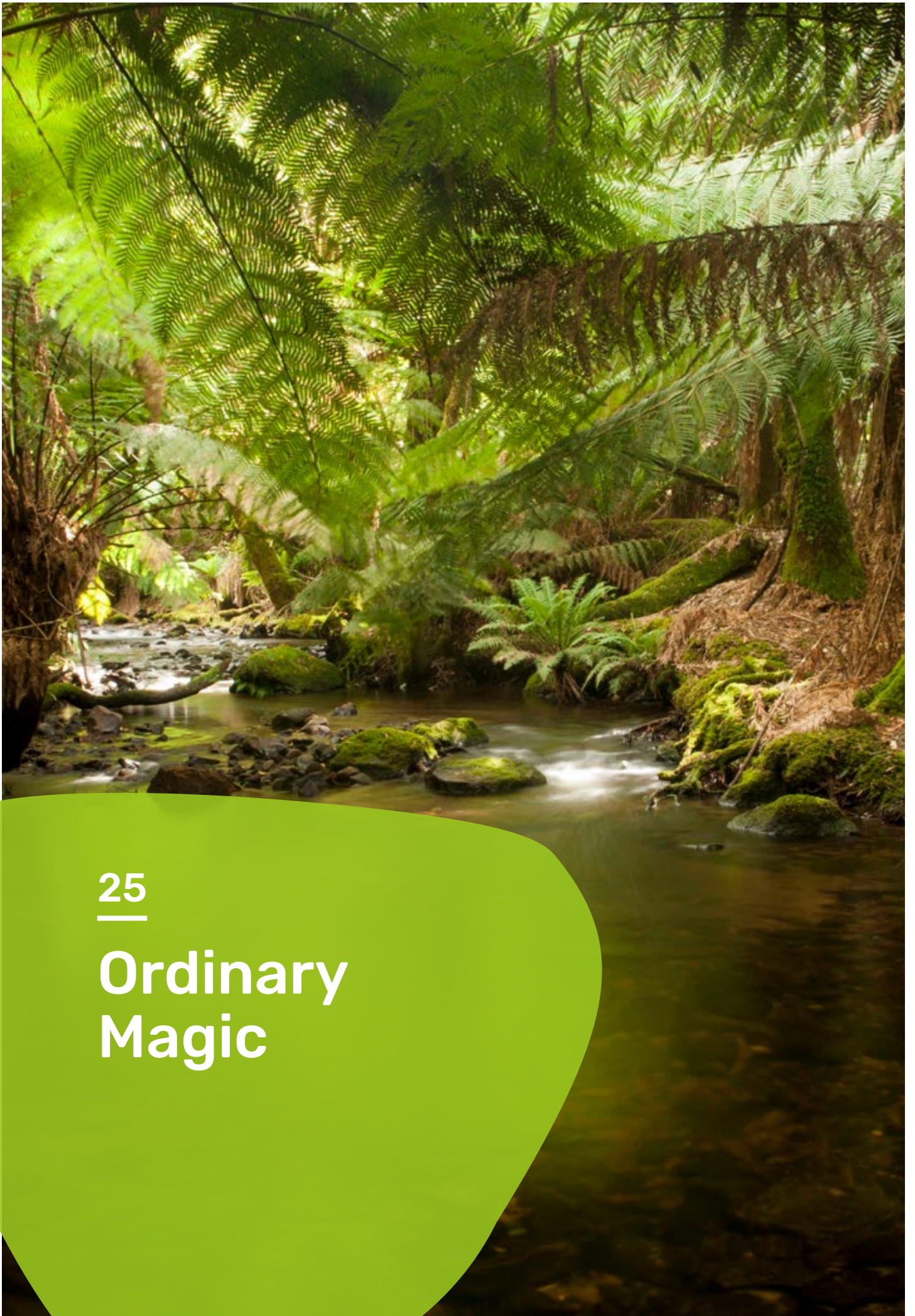
We are not giving our children the gift of education that we enjoyed. We are giving them an inadequate, underfunded, ill-resourced version that does not meet the current reality. And the statistics reflect that. A population where almost half of us are functionally illiterate and innumerate is a shocking waste of human potential.

We need to mobilise now to demand that our children have a curriculum with proven literacy and numeracy outcomes. Successive governments have paid lip-service to improving educational standards. There is no need for reviews or white papers. We know the answers.

Reading is the wellspring of imagination. We cannot imagine what we might be if we have no insight into all that humans have already achieved. Reading is history but it is also currency.

We are failing our children if education in Tasmania is not an urgent priority. In the next ten years, we could lift our children up and become the state with the highest learning outcomes. But it will take renewed courage and commitment from government, parents and community.





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# Ordinary Magic



## Ordinary Magic

BY HELEN HAYWARD

Helen Hayward is a freelance writer based in Hobart. Her latest book, a memoir of motherhood, is *A Slow Childhood: Notes on Thoughtful Parenting*.

I had children so that I could read picture books to them; though it sounds ridiculous to say it and it wasn't nearly that simple. But in a way it's true. I had children not to ease existential angst, to appease my wider family, or to stop wondering what it might be like having them. Apart from usual reasons I had children in the hope of re-finding the ordinary magic of childhood which, for many years, fixed on individual career goals, had been lost to me.

I found this ordinary magic – there all along had I not been too busy to see it – inside nearly every picture book I read aloud to my kids. For me this wasn't something extra, a reward after a long day. It was as essential as cooking for them. Looking back, my kids must have listened to as many storybooks as they ate meals, thanks to the generosity of libraries that allowed us to BORROW a greedy ten at a time. When they were terrible twos (and fours!) I'd zap them at lunchtime with a picture book, two jangly children casting off from the kitchen table, far away from each other and me. Instead we were off somewhere else: in a windy forest, on a white-capped sea, under a farmer's hat.

On snapping shut a picture book I'd try not to ask my kids what they thought of it, curious to see what they might come up with on their own. I wanted them to soak up the story and to make of it what they would – even nothing, for a child, is something. Like them I always knew when a picture book was good, not by the star embossed on the cover, or glowing quote from someone or other, but by how it left us feeling.



On snapping shut a really good picture book I'd feel a mix of wonder, appreciation and relief.

Stories in picture books come from another place, hence their magic. The blissful thing about reading aloud to my kids was that, while I read, I was just the reader. I wasn't the Mummy who insisted that they brush their teeth before bed or get their bags ready for school. I was a voice under a bedside lamp reading a story; I was just me and they were just them.

Long after my kids' friends put away childish things, long after my kids stopped accompanying me, I kept up my trips to the library. I'd borrow hiking and sailing magazines too, and audio books for the car, but it was picture books I spent most time choosing. Just as I'd always done with people, full knowing I wasn't supposed to, I judged them by their covers. I didn't always win: some, it turned out, had been written by the teacher's pet, a number were too clever by half, others oozed political correctness. 'That was written for a parent', my daughter would sneer with disappointment, 'not a child'. However, far and away, the majority were produced with a care and sensitivity that I couldn't help wishing news editors might copy.

On snapping shut a really good picture book I'd feel a mixture of wonder, appreciation and relief. Wonder at the combined skill of a writer and illustrator who'd captured an aspect of life that too often passed me by; appreciation at a production team who'd made simple words and images live daringly on the page; and relief that even after a long day, even living in a scary world, even with my kids growing up not knowing what comes next, our souls could still be brushed by the ordinary magic of a picture book.

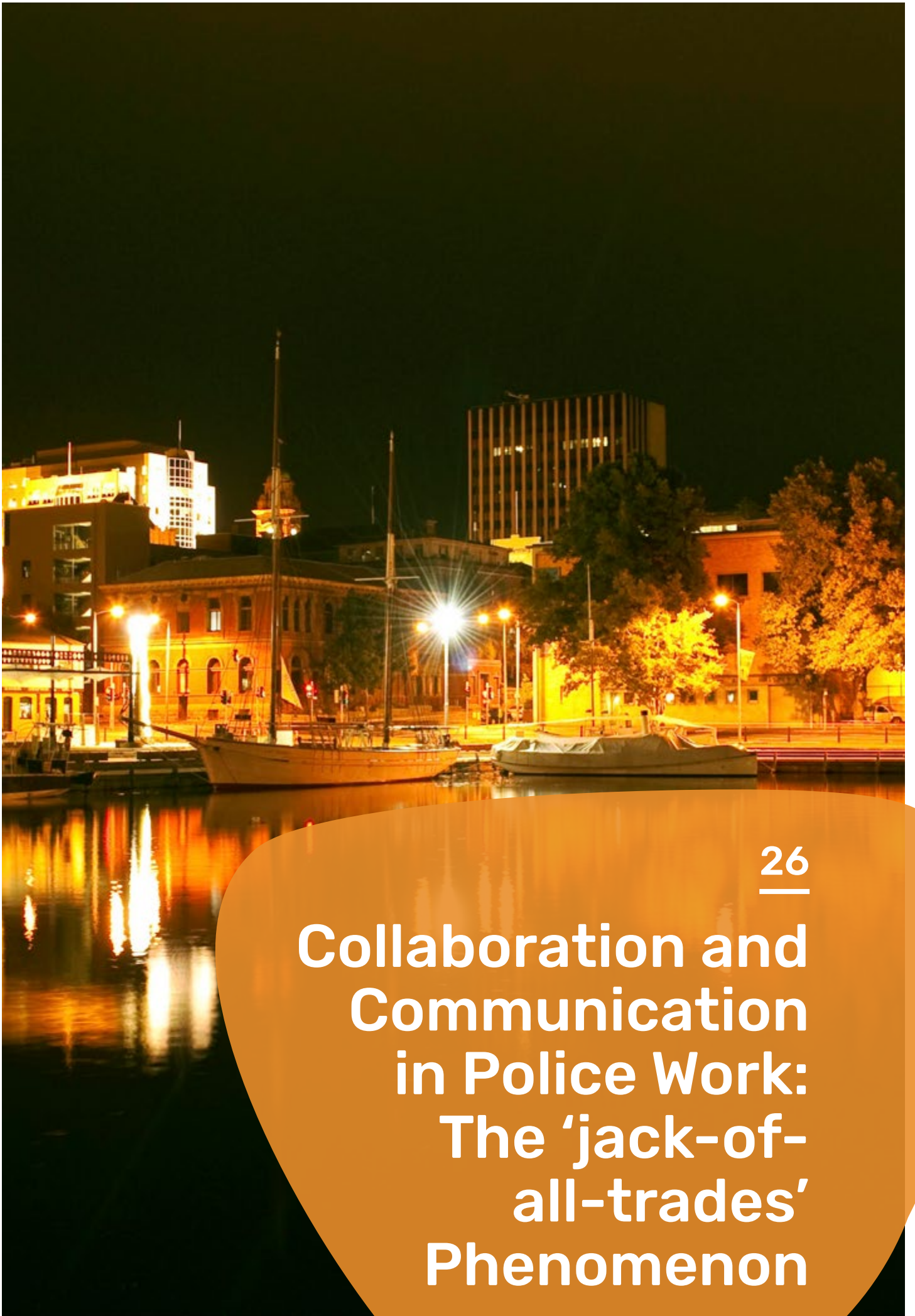
The worst part about my children leaving home is knowing that I won't be reading them picture books any more. My husband feels this too, avid reader that he is; only his choice to read aloud was always novels, not picture books, which in my mind aren't quite the same. All those fantastic new titles born into bookshops each year won't be mine to borrow from the library, to read to my kids in the quiet of their bedroom, and to drop through a chute a week later.

The worst part about my children leaving home is knowing that I won't be reading them picture books any more.

In my ideal world there would be picture books for grown-ups. There would be no awkwardness about walking into a bookshop and asking for the adult picture book section. It might even be by the front window, with titles facing out to entice passersby.

With my kids growing up and moving on – as I type this my daughter's Asterix comic lies open on the kitchen table – I feel an urge to rescue my kids' favourite picture books from the vagaries of the future. However, I also know that the ordinary magic caught up in them might be better left to roam, to do what it will, like a red balloon sailing above the streets and clouds of Paris.





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**Collaboration and  
Communication  
in Police Work:  
The 'jack-of-  
all-trades'  
Phenomenon**



# Collaboration and Communication in Police Work: The 'jack-of-all-trades' Phenomenon

BY ISABELLE BARTKOWIAK-THÉRON & ROBERTA JULIAN

Dr Isabelle Bartkowiak-Théron is a senior researcher in the Tasmanian Institute of Law Enforcement Studies (TILES) at the University of Tasmania.

Professor Roberta Julian is Foundation Director of the TILES at the University of Tasmania.

Do you know what a police officer does?

Chances are that the very first images to cross your mind when you ponder this question are those of SWAT teams, investigators, patrols, drug busts, handcuffs, and the like. However linked to popular culture these images are (the by-product of CSI-inspired TV programs), they are a far cry from the typical on-the-job activities of a police officer in Tasmania, and throughout Australia.

Did you know that 75% of police interactions with the public are with vulnerable people? From youths to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, from people living with a mental illness to people with addictive behaviours, from repeat drink drivers to people suffering a brain injury, people with a form of vulnerability, as defined in legislation and policy, are the core business of police officers. Some of these encounters are volatile and can generate the kind of imagery that provides the 'bread and butter' of the film and TV industry.

In a nutshell, the reality of police work is more about negotiating the complexities of duty of care than the ongoing navigation of everyday public life as a battlefield.

However, most of these encounters are not violent, and consist of activities such as welfare checks, agency referrals, bail monitoring, assistance to emergency personnel, etc.

In a nutshell, the reality of police work is more about negotiating the complexities of duty of care than the ongoing navigation of everyday public life as a battlefield. This raises a number of questions: How do we reconcile what we THINK police work is about, with what police work REALLY is? How do we reconcile police work with activities that would appear to be non-police-related? And if police are, as part of their duties, doing 'non-police work', how do we train them to do it properly?

Contemporary police organisations in countries such as Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom are now placing a significant emphasis on police officers as collaborators, communicators and problem-solvers, rather than crime fighters. In a growing acknowledgement that police do much more than respond to crime, their work is increasingly seen as situated along a broad continuum of actions that span accompanying young people on the street or absconding from school back to a place of safety, to the recovery of a dead body after a fatal overdose. We expect police officers to de-escalate potentially violent situations and bring individuals in crisis to medical personnel for evaluation and follow-up treatment.

None of this is about responding to crime. None of this has to do with law enforcement. Frankly, none of this is direct police business if we understand this from a *minimalist* perspective; that is, the view that the core business of police is narrowly focused on law enforcement and crime fighting. On the other hand, the *maximalist* perspective, now gaining traction, forces us to start considering police officers as public peacekeepers, problem-solvers, and public health interventionists.

There is undoubtedly a discussion to be had about why police perform such tasks instead of other professionals, who have arguably a better understanding of de-escalation techniques and of the brain chemistry during a mental health crisis. Yet, the police officer always shows up first at the scene.

Perhaps we need to stop thinking of these professionals as estranged workers in siloed industries. In reality, they all work together. Cross-agency collaboration is one of the biggest untold success stories of the past decades when addressing issues of national security, public safety and public health. However, we still have much further to go before we can pat ourselves on the back.

Today, police are commonly referred to as 'brokers of services'. Available 24/7 all year round, they have the capacity to identify, initially address and refer problems to other agencies. At a strategic level, the police participate in a large number of formal inter-agency partnerships with other government and non-government organisations specialising in a discrete portfolio. Usually, these portfolios are linked to one of several vulnerabilities: homelessness, disability, addiction, literacy, mental health, refugee status, etc. These institutional arrangements unavoidably trickle down to the constable who patrols the streets as she attempts to address the symptoms of a social 'mal-être' that can be connected to any one or more of these vulnerabilities. This is where referrals to drug and alcohol education come from, as well as referrals to mental health evaluations, courts, counselling, school authorities, and road safety authorities, to name only a few. If the police action does not directly involve an actual referral, some of these organisations will appear at some point, as a 'Cc' at the bottom of administrative paperwork.

Police training is now different from what it was 20 or 30 years ago. Of course, there remains an essential commitment to the law enforcement aspect of the portfolio (because otherwise, who else would do it?). However, a greater emphasis is placed on the need for a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the relationship between vulnerability and crime (because otherwise, who else could better picture it?), and of course, on acknowledging the various actors who need to play their part in the problem-solving process (because otherwise, who else will drive inter-agency outcomes?).



Collaboration, communication and leadership (including reflective practice), then, lie at the heart of training ‘good cops’ today. Acknowledging the critical role of police in public safety *and* public health is paramount. It is well documented that some agencies only become aware of the needs of their (soon-to-be) clients because police become involved and raise a red flag. This is one of the most tell-tale signs that police are not only specialists in addressing crime but are involved in all aspects of the public health continuum. This requires new ways of thinking about police work.

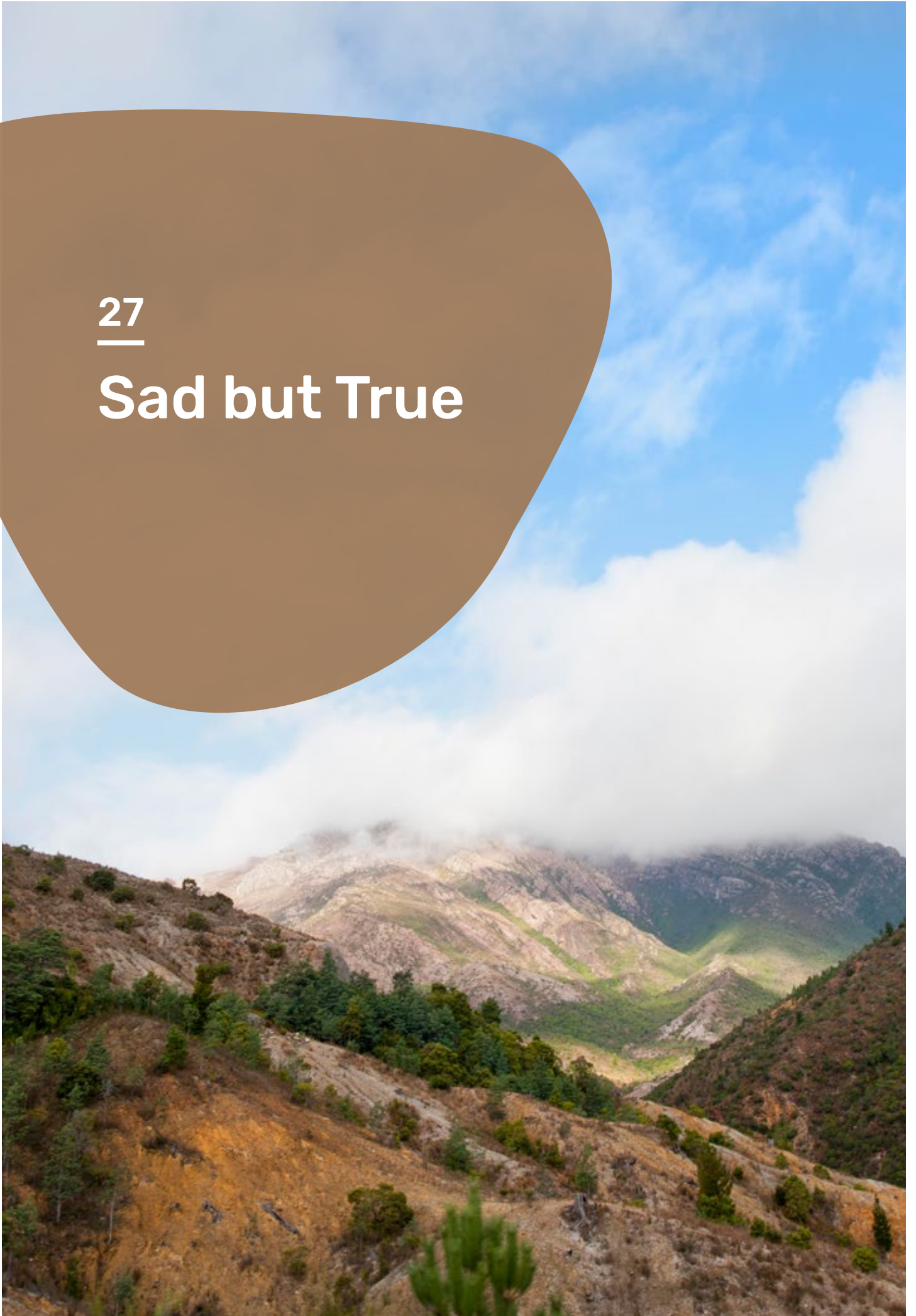
A week before disseminating this opinion piece, one of us was co-teaching recruits with a serving police officer. Upon answering a question about referrals of cautioned young people to external agencies, the police officer matter-of-factly responded:

‘Yes. You must know all this. We are jacks-of-all-trades. You might as well get used to it’’

Maybe we should give this some serious thought.

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# Sad but True



# Sad but True

BY JAMES

James is a literate man with lived experience of prison.

**G**reetings everyone. First and foremost I would like to thank Rosie Martin for asking me to give my thoughts and ideas regarding the issues in Tasmania surrounding written language skills.

I had the pleasure of meeting Rosie in person. But before that meeting took place, I recall watching television one day and the story that was being broadcast was about a lady who was nominated for Tasmanian of the Year for her passion to teach people how to read and write, but more importantly how to understand and communicate what they were learning.

These people weren't just your everyday people, they were different. They were like me – inmates from Tasmania's Risdon Prison. (Or the Pink Palace as it was known back in the old days.)

With all that said, I get to witness – on a daily basis – all walks of life, all ages, but more importantly the 48% which is probably more noticeable in here compared to the general public – where you might know only one or two people who fit into the category of persons who can't read or write well.

Sad, but in here it's the truth.

On any given day you may be approached by another inmate asking how to spell a word that has four or more letters in it, or to fill out a request form on their behalf because they just can't read or understand what the letters on the piece of A4 mean.

Currently the prison has an education learning program in place but the problem is that it is not compulsory. That makes it an easy option for those who need help to avoid it because they are embarrassed.

The problem exists, and we can't just turn a blind eye to it anymore.

I hope 2018 is the year that the people in the power positions make the right decisions and allocate the right funds to the necessary organisations who want to change it for the future of this state, and country, and lead by example.

How can we help?

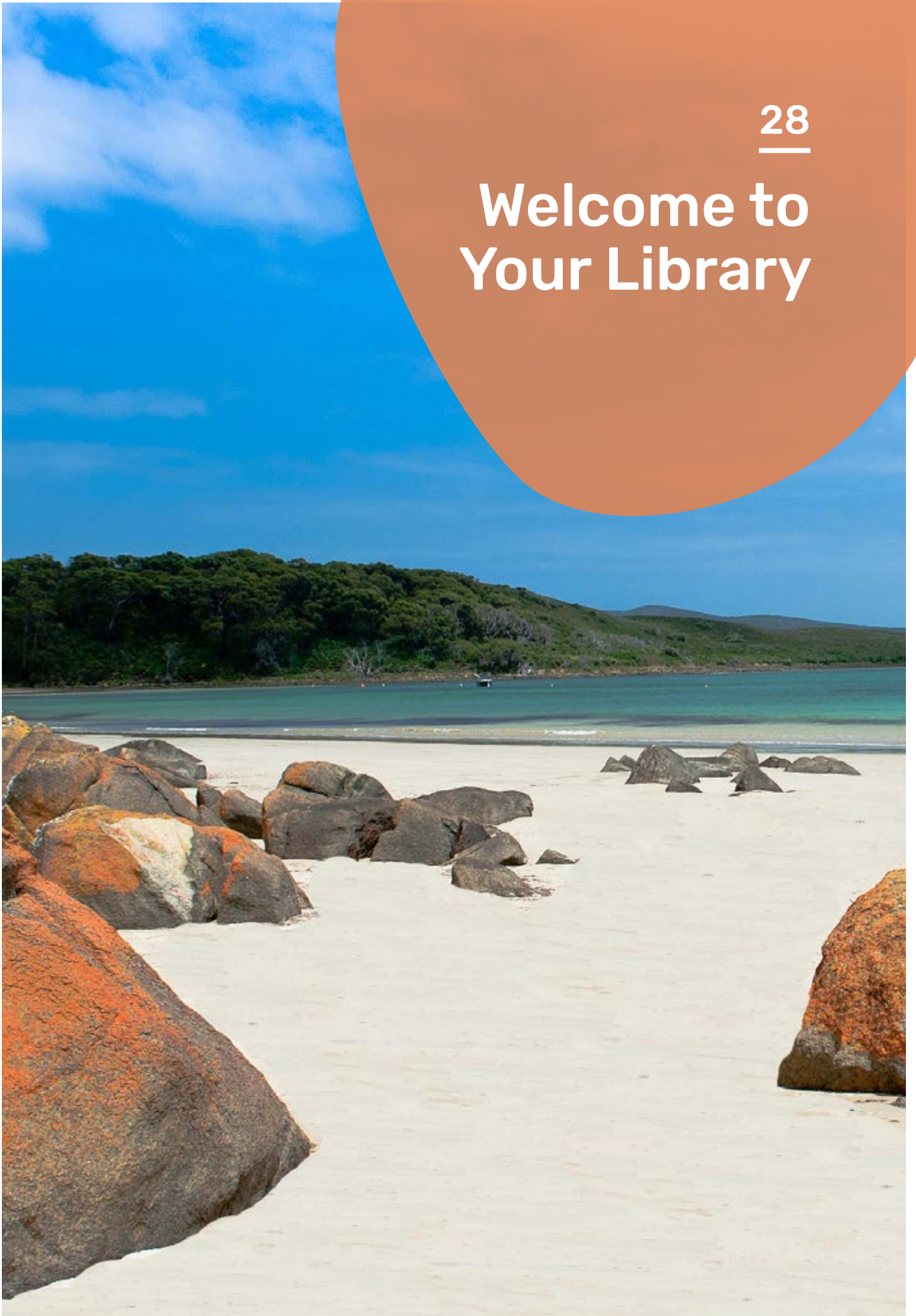
- Awareness/TV.
- Currently the prison has an education learning program in place but the problem is that it is not compulsory. That makes it an easy option for those who need help to avoid it because they are embarrassed. They feel belittled. But I found that if another inmate is willing to help them they tend to let a barrier wall down enough to engage.
- More correctional staff should encourage inmates instead of turning a blind eye.
- More inmates need to be helping others who need it and be supported by correctional staff for their efforts.
- Peer tutoring that is an in-prison job if you qualify, or if you work within the educational guidelines.

These are just some of my thoughts.



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# Welcome to Your Library





# Welcome to Your Library

BY JAMES MCGORAN

James McGoran holds a Graduate Diploma of Information Management from the University of Tasmania (UTAS) and a Bachelor of Arts from the University of the West of Scotland. As well as working in a 7-12 school library in Launceston, he has worked for LINC Tasmania and is a regular contributor to the Australian Library and Information Association.

**M**y first experience of Tasmania's literacy problem came when I was working at LINC Tasmania. I was on the reference desk and a young lad in trade uniform, not more than 19 or 20, asked me how to get an Australian Business Number (ABN). I explained that the process is online, and that he was welcome to use the library's computers to apply for his ABN.

Silence.

He thought for a few seconds. Then, 'Can you help me?'

This was an intelligent, skilled and driven young person, yet he couldn't read, or write, at the level required to fill in a government form.

In the end I sat with him and read each question to him and explained what the language that was used meant, until we completed the form together.

That was in 2012. For the last five years I've been working in a 7-12 Catholic college library. We're fortunate enough that our library is well staffed and well funded, that our teachers care, and that the majority of our students are at least at a functional level of literacy.

What do you like? What movies do you like? Do you have a hobby? Play a sport? Video games? What have you seen on Netflix, or YouTube?

Still, those of us who are in school libraries work extremely hard for our students, to try to at least maintain that level of literacy, and strive to increase it.

We run literacy programs, read-a-thons, have fortnightly library lessons through middle school – all to put books into the hands of children. That's what has an impact on literacy. The time and support given to our students to explore books and reading.

Staff in school libraries perform quality one-on-one reader advisory with students. We know our collections, we constantly improve them, and we'll work with individuals to find something that they'll love.

What do you like? What movies do you like? Do you have a hobby? Play a sport? Video games? What have you seen on Netflix, or YouTube?

A major part of this process is creating a welcoming environment that both students (and teachers!) want to come to. We want to impart a sense of ownership to our clients, so that they feel like they belong, and that their library space belongs to them.

That is the very first thing I say to our new Year 7s when they come in. Welcome to *your* library.

We run STEM workshops, play games at lunch, offer digital alternatives such as eBooks and audiobooks, hold competitions, facilitate conversations, even just offer a good old-fashioned hang-out space.

Not all schools are so lucky.

NAPLAN results in Tasmania are lagging behind the national average, and most school libraries are either understaffed or not staffed at all. Multiple studies have proven the positive benefits for students of having an appropriately staffed school library (look it up, and if you need help ask your local librarian; it's kind of what we do).

In May 2018 a new nationwide campaign is going to start advocating for adequate staff in all school libraries, so that our students are granted equal and quality opportunities.

*School Libraries Matter* is endorsed by authors, community leaders and influencers and is aimed at parents, policy makers and school management groups. Keep an eye out for it.

Young people, children and teenagers are the economic future and security of Tasmania. Helping them develop functional literacy skills is the core mission of the school library. It makes sense to support and advocate for school libraries.

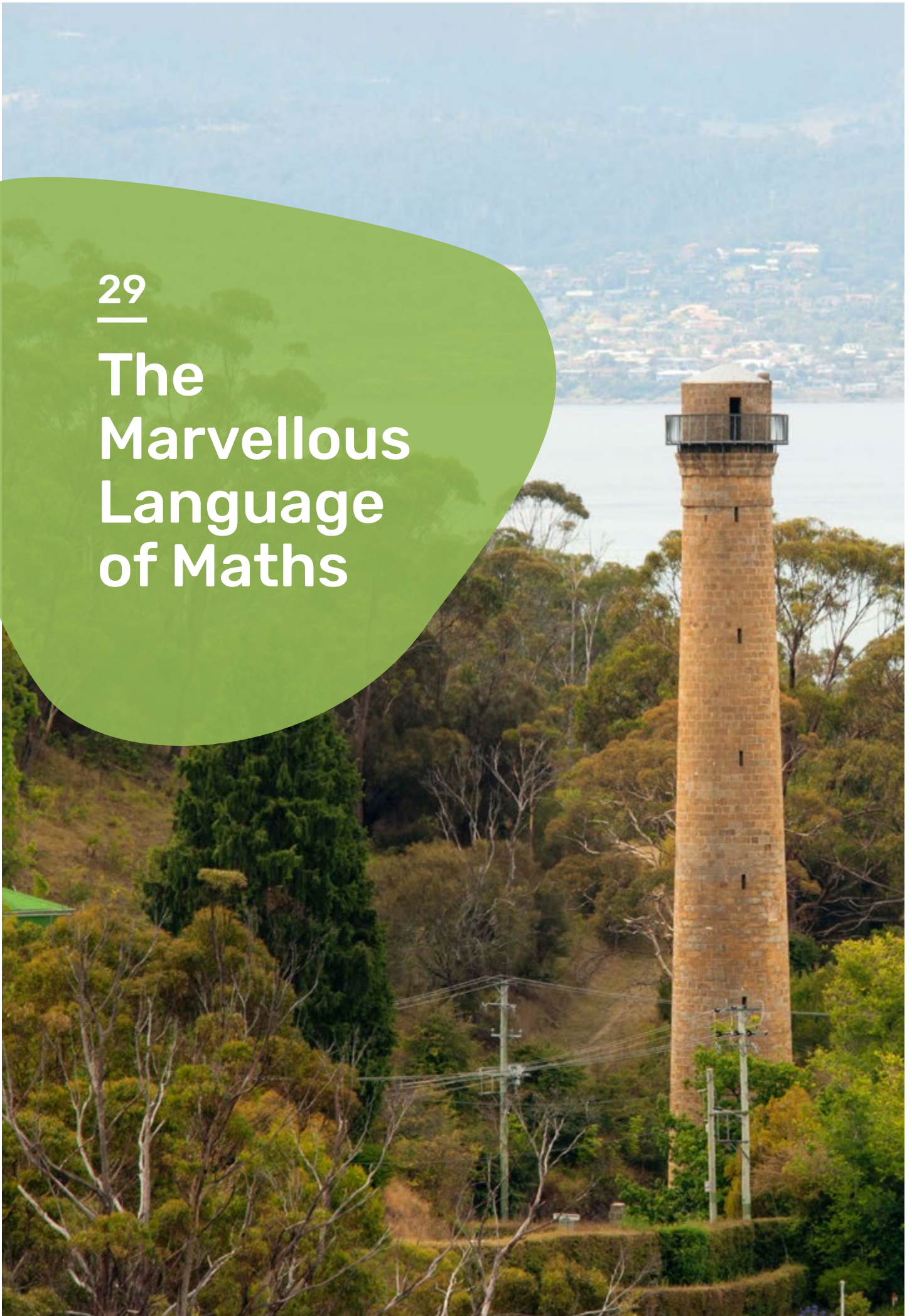


*Something to think about: How can you support school libraries?*



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# The Marvellous Language of Maths





# The Marvellous Language of Maths

BY JANE MORRISON

Jane Morrison counts herself fortunate to have spent a career in education working with incredible young people and watching them grow in confidence and enthusiasm towards mathematics. At home, she shares her life with husband David and four precious children – Hannah, Bek, Daniel and John.

I am no expert in literacy but I have worked in mathematics education for nearly 30 years and have witnessed the effects of poor literacy on people's ability to comprehend and decode mathematical problems.

Often this is most apparent in the courses that are tailored to cater for our less mathematically able students. In an attempt to contextualise problems, we surround them with words. So, a person who struggles with their literacy can then also be locked out from success in numeracy because they are unable to decode what mathematical process is required.

Literacy and mathematical success are inextricably linked.

I have taught in a range of educational facilities (primary school, high school, college, TAFE, public and private) in New South Wales, Tasmania and the Northern Territory. I have had the privilege of working with students and their families from a range of backgrounds, and, whilst some are more jaded than others, all, when given the chance and the tools, want to succeed and take great joy in learning. For some, this process is much more difficult than for others.



We need to employ tools to enable students to decode the language around mathematics.

In a recent piece on the SBS news, the news team spoke to a maths teacher in Campbelltown in Sydney. He worked as the head of mathematics at a high school that had markedly increased the students' results in the NAPLAN numeracy testing. One of the key ways this was done was by explicitly teaching and decoding the mathematical language. This focus on the literacy of mathematics had a significant impact on the understanding of, and success in, mathematics for the students of this school – many of whom come from non-English speaking backgrounds.

This points to something.

To improve our students' numeracy, we need to help them decode the language. To raise our numeracy results, we need to ensure the students can access the language.

Literacy issues need to be tackled early. In some cases, this may require support from professionals with expert knowledge which goes beyond that of the classroom teacher. This will have the most positive effect if it is able to be accessed early. The longer it is left, the more defences are built up and the harder it is to break down the resistance. Most students learn quickly how to hide their deficiencies and often poor behaviour is used as a defence mechanism to prevent exposure.

An investment in improving early literacy is one worth making because it opens doors for the student in the future, not just in literacy but in numeracy as well.

Teachers also need to break the language down for our students in our mathematics lessons. We need to be explicitly teaching students the language of mathematics along with the processes. Students need exposure to the words and phrases of mathematics and their meanings.

Whilst I strongly believe this, I also believe that the assessment of what is success in numeracy should be looked at so that students who do have literacy issues are not automatically excluded from experiencing success in numeracy as well. Success can do wonders for engagement and persistence.

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# Communication: Bridging the Space Between







## Communication: Bridging the Space Between

BY DR JEFF THOMAS

Following a career in secondary school teaching, Dr Jeff Thomas is a lecturer at the University of Tasmania. He has a keen interest in the connection between student engagement and behaviour. He lives with his wife and four children in South Hobart.

We often hear that relationships are the key when it comes to educational success. Strong student – teacher relationships have been linked with school retention, improved student behaviour and academic attainment. The importance of that unique connection between student and teacher cannot be overstated.

The power of the relationship, however, extends beyond that which exists between students and their teachers. Teachers form one aspect of the broader relationship that students have with school. This student – school relationship is created in all the interactions that occur between the student and the curriculum, between the student and the behaviour management approach, between the student and their peers.

It is created when students enter the physical school environment, when they receive an assessment report and when they are celebrated in assemblies. I would go further and suggest that each student’s relationship with education goes past the school gate, and beyond school hours. How education is talked about in the home affects the relationship, what is written in the media about teachers affects the relationship, how our governments prioritise education affects the relationship.

This relationship between a student and education is what I define as *educational engagement*. Educational engagement, like any relationship, is complex. It is not only how students ‘act’ towards school, but how they think about and, most importantly, *feel* about education. It is also dialectic; it is how education ‘acts’ towards its students, and how it demonstrates how it thinks and feels about the place of all young people within it.

Students in a strong relationship with education tend to stay at school longer, attain higher and have much better life outcomes than those with a weak relationship. We can think of the weakening relationship between students and education as disengagement. Far from placing the responsibility of disengagement upon the student – or blaming the teacher – seeing engagement as relationship encourages us to see that disengagement indicates that there is something wrong in the ‘space between’, something not working in the interactions between the student and education.

When we closely examine the complexity of the relationship between students and education, we see that disengagement constitutes the breakdown of the relationship. We therefore need to ask why that might happen and what we can all do to prevent it.

Communication is at the heart of any successful relationship, and educational engagement is no exception.

How we send messages to our young people about their place in our schools, in education and in society more broadly has a direct impact on the strength of the relationship between those young people and education. When we think about our most literate, most able and most socially advantaged students, it is clear to see that the messages being given to them from our society are, on the whole, positive and affirming. These students receive the message that they are capable, that education is a pathway to future success, and that school is an enjoyable, safe place where positive relationships with other students and teachers can be found.

We must also ask what messages are received by our least literate, least able and most socially disadvantaged students. Some common ones might be:

You are in the bottom half.

You don’t belong at school.

You are disruptive.

You are not worth the same support, facilities or prestige as your peers.

These are the messages that weaken the relationship between the student and education, and that lead to disengagement. We see the results of that disengagement in poor participation, poor conduct, poor attendance and of course poor educational attainment. It becomes a vicious cycle which starts with educational disadvantage and spirals in an ever-decreasing level of engagement until, for some, the relationship with education becomes irreparably broken.

So, what do we do?

We need to interrogate the ways we communicate and messages we communicate to our students about their place within educational settings. We need messages that value teachers, value public schools, value learning and literacy and, most importantly, value the students themselves. We need to think about what messages students receive when they are put into detention, are suspended or are excluded from our schools. We need to consider pedagogies and practices that are either irrelevant or impenetrable for some students. We need to think about what messages are given to students who think and act differently from what might be considered the norm. We need to be critical of what happens when our students are mandated to sit standardised tests that have nothing to do with their learning, their interests or the purpose of education.

We need to ask the question of all our policies, procedures and teaching practices ‘will this interaction strengthen or weaken the students’ relationship with education?’

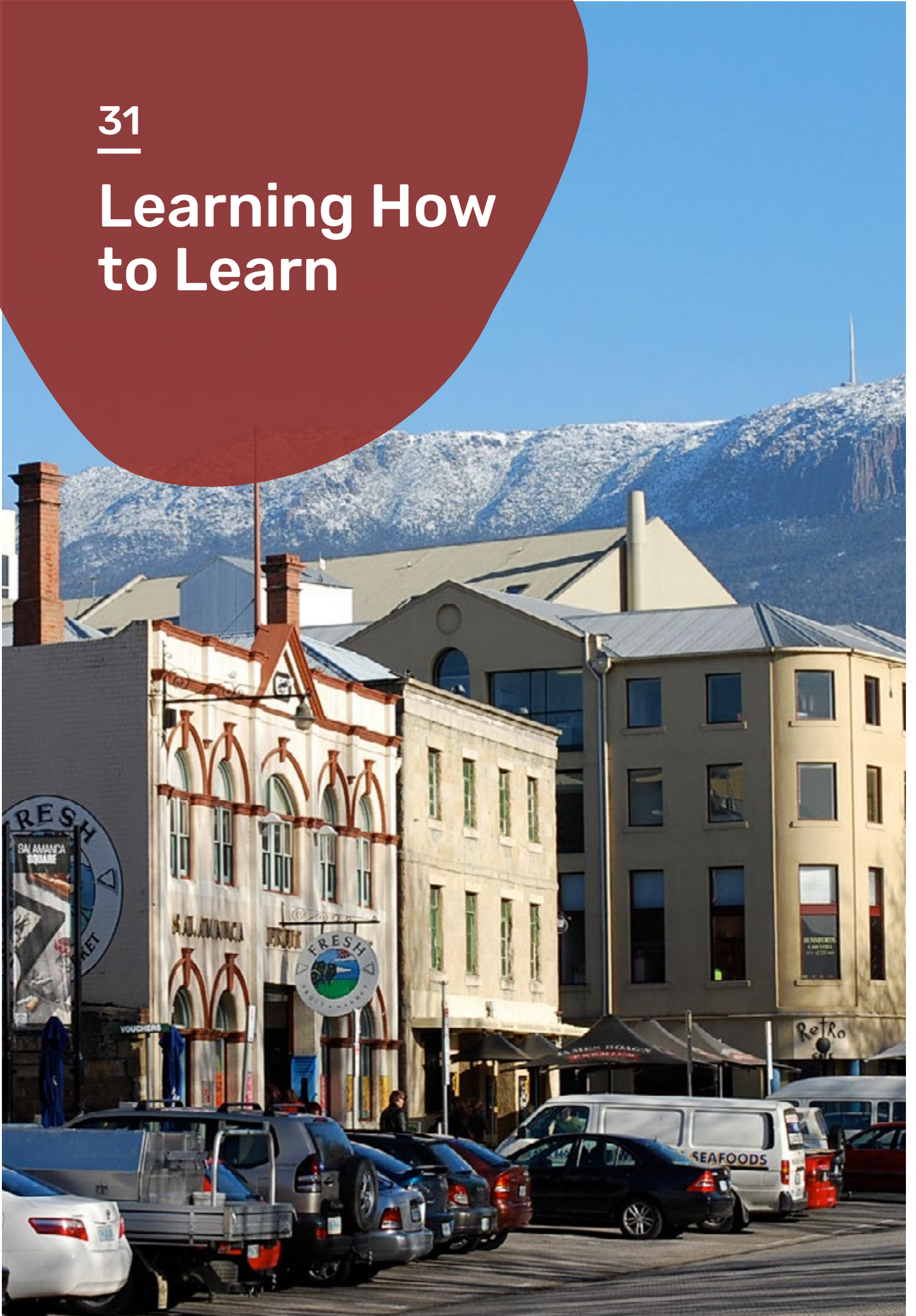


*Something to think about: What policies and procedures strengthen all students’ relationship with education?*



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# Learning How to Learn







# Learning How to Learn

BY JOHN MULA

John Mula is the Executive Director of Catholic Education in Tasmania.

It is a daunting task for a teacher or principal or a system leader to decide to challenge the status quo and address student achievement particularly as it applies to literacy. The perennial question is ‘where to begin?’

In a caring profession, the tendency is for educators to define the problem and employ remedial actions. My professional experience of over 35 years in education tells me there is no ‘silver bullet’, no magic solution. Therefore to address the issues of literacy we need to address what we understand about learning. It is vital in preparing our children and young adults for the realities of living, learning and working that we start with a clear vision for learning.

I propose that our vision is that all children and students are highly literate and numerate critical thinkers, who discover their true calling and serve their communities, local and global, to create the society.

In recent years there has been a lot of rhetoric about schools being contemporary learning communities. In reality, though, our traditional model of a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to schooling remains firmly entrenched in the majority of our classrooms. Similarly, in recent years, our fascination with data-driven, incremental school improvement has lock-stepped students into achieving narrowly defined, easily measured predetermined goals. Unfortunately, our current processes and structures then strangle rather than ignite the students’ imagination and creative spirit which is very much key to contemporary pedagogies.

We need to acknowledge that our current model of schooling undervalues students' ability to learn – particularly those who sit toward the ends of the bell curve. All too often the bar is too low or unrealistically high. Those who fail to meet the narrow measures are considered non-academic and, thus, not bright. Yet outside in the real world, these students are highly creative and confident learners.

I propose that what lies at the heart of literacy, and for that matter the heart of learning, is our willingness to refocus our attention. As an education profession we need to *learn how to learn* rather than what to learn. Learning in our current context is about communications that make connections and create meaning. If schools exist for the purpose of ensuring students learn things worth knowing then is there anything more worthwhile knowing than knowing how to learn?

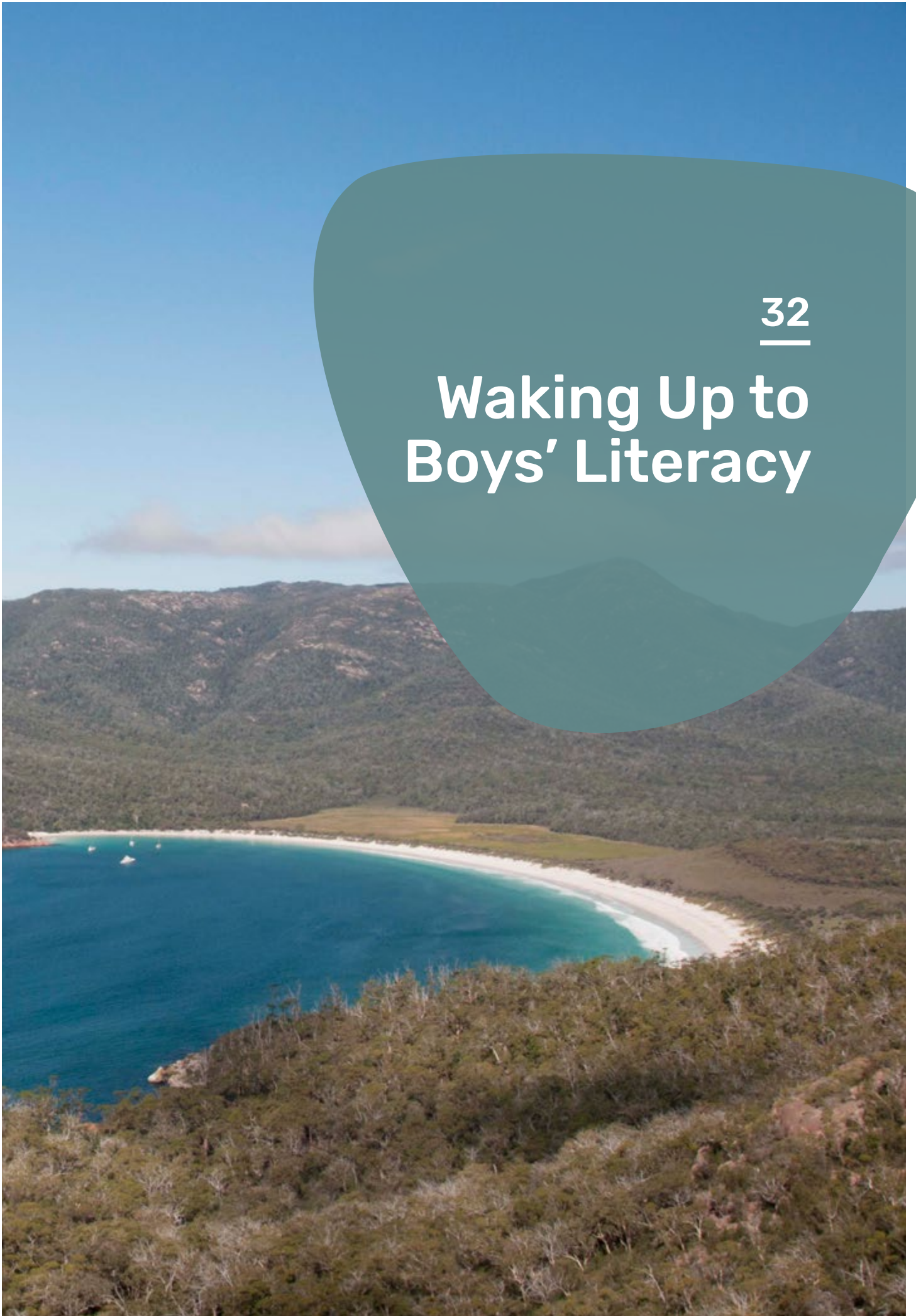
Similarly, as educators we also have to become more comfortable accepting that *learning how to learn* is not something we can easily measure as it can't be simply reduced to a set of scores that can be ranked and compared.

It then follows if educators understand *how to learn* their task is to impart that understanding to students who in turn learn *how to learn* with a view to becoming an expert in learning. They will then have greater opportunities to see the connections between themselves and others, between theory and information, between reading words and comprehension and, importantly, between curricula and their real-life experiences. Our challenge as educators is to support students to make connections between new learning and what they already know, and then organise it in relation to important concepts.

What is at the heart of literacy and our end goal is for students to deepen their learning and understanding through metacognition, the process of self-monitoring and reflection about what and how we learn. This type of thinking allows for new connections to be made within and across the learning area and the learner's context, and helps create and reinforce the learning skills required to flourish both in themselves and as a member of the community.

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# Waking Up to Boys' Literacy





## Waking Up to Boys' Literacy

BY JONATHAN BEDLOE

Jonathan Bedloe is a passionate advocate for the wellbeing of men and boys. He is chair of Men's Resources Tasmania and the Australian Men's Health Forum, and works in the Tasmanian community sector.

**A**n elbow in the ribs again. 'Dad!' said my daughter, frustrated that I'd fallen asleep yet again. I was supposed to be reading *her* to sleep. I always chose three short books to read at bedtime, rather than one long one, because of my tendency to kip. Of course, she usually wanted three long ones.

What a joy it was to read to my children. Now, to see them reading novels – my son devouring hefty tomes in just a few days – is equally satisfying. Listening to him talk about the discussions he has with his Year 11 philosophy teacher about philosophical zombies is wonderful. He has the words he needs to defend himself, to express his ideas, to communicate with skill.

Unfortunately, far too many Tasmanians, and far too many boys, lack sufficient literacy skills. The problem of boys falling behind girls in literacy results is a global issue. Girls experience fewer opportunities in some areas of life, and I believe that resolving those differences requires us to address areas of life where boys also lack opportunities.

Did you know that nearly a quarter (23%) of Year 4 boys score below the expected standard for literacy, compared with 15% of girls? Research



**We will see our whole community benefit if we can improve literacy for boys.**

conducted in 2016 by Roy Morgan also showed that boys are less likely than girls to say they enjoy reading (68%/82%), and to spend money on books (18%/28%). One in five boys lag behind their peers in literacy and numeracy, due to behavioural or emotional problems identified in the third grade. We know also that boys complete Year 12 and tertiary education at lower levels than girls, and that boys are far more often suspended or expelled. According to Dr Julie Moschion of the University of Melbourne, boys have been out-performed in literacy by girls for 50 years. Surely, it's time to do something about this?

We will see our whole community benefit if we can improve literacy for boys. Dr Moschion states that low literacy rates in boys risks future social disconnectedness, unemployment and criminality. Improving literacy in childhood is surely one of the most potentially powerful, truly preventive ways to address those issues.

So how can we improve outcomes for boys, and our community? Typically, when we want men to change, we tell them what to change and how they should change it. But this approach lacks understanding about *how* people change. We need a new approach – a community response that is relational, psychologically safe, non-judgemental and full of empathy. We need to accept men and boys where they are, and give them the tools, support and encouragement that will enable them to share a love of literacy and reading.

At a community level, there is much to do to encourage and enable dads to read to their kids – and to provide opportunities for boys to see other male role models spruiking the value of reading and literacy. Several years ago, a play centre in Burnie provided a 'rough and tumble' play space for dads and kids – an innovative idea at the time. The same kind of approach can facilitate better literacy. Let's add to those dad-friendly play areas with a space where dads can find information and resources about the benefits of reading to their sons and daughters – a place that facilitates, encourages and enables men to read to their children.

Studies by Dr Vaughan Cruikshank of the University of Tasmania highlight the waning numbers of male teachers in early childhood and primary school. For the many children who don't have daily access to their dad or other good men, school and childcare are vital places where boys can see men engaging in, valuing and sharing reading and literacy. Libraries, neighbourhood houses and child and family centres could create a dads' reading space during Men's Health Week, or in the lead up to Fathers Day. And schools could promote a dads' reading day once a month.

The UK Literacy Trust took action on boys' literacy in 2012 by creating the Boys' Reading Commission. In addition to improving efforts at home and school, the Commission found that community-wide activities promoting male identities who valued learning and reading were also important. Professor Robyn Cox of the Primary English Teaching Association of Australia recently pointed to images of David Beckham reading, which were posted in UK bus shelters and other community spaces. Where is the Tasmanian David-Beckham-with-a-book who is willing to join with us and take a step towards improving literacy for boys?

Evidence shows that dads reading to their kids brings broad benefits, including improved cognitive function, resilience and moral judgment. A 2017 study at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute showed that children who are read to by their dads at age two showed better language development at age four. Dads come out ahead too, with improved self-confidence, better attachment with children, increased community participation, and reduced stress and substance use. What's not to like?

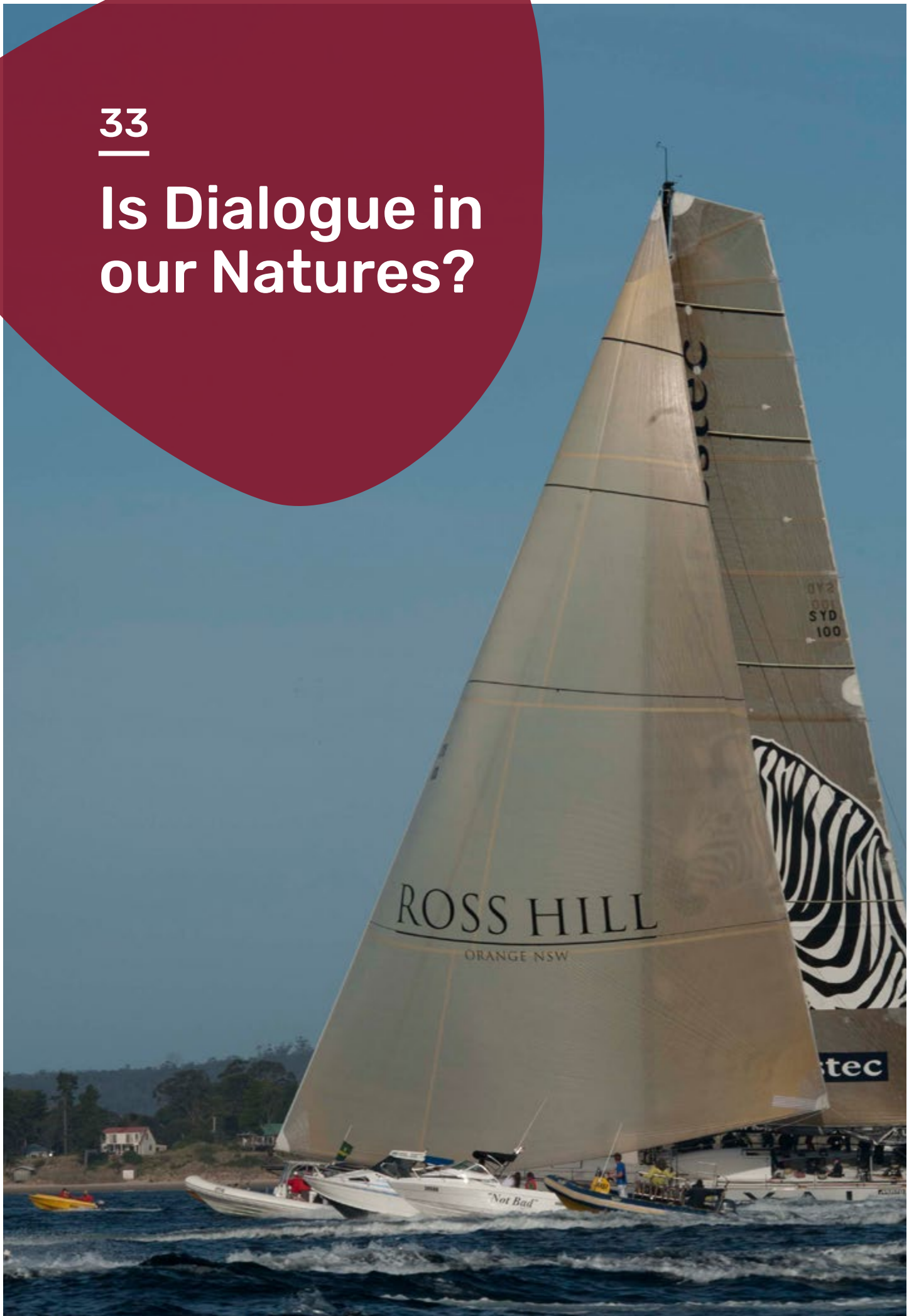
So dads, read to your children. Every day. As long as you can stay awake!



*Something to think about: There is a lot happening to promote gender equality with regard to women in Tasmania: what do we need to do to include the areas where boys and men are negatively affected?*

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# Is Dialogue in our Natures?





## Is Dialogue in our Natures?

BY JORDAN MARTIN

Jordan Martin, a Tasmanian abroad, is (full disclosure) Rosalie's son, and is himself a young father. He is a doctoral student in philosophy at the millennium-old Yuelu Academy in China's Hunan Province, and is afflicted by all the typical worries about spreading himself too thinly.

Is genuinely open-ended dialogue actually part of human nature

On the politically fraught question of nature and nurture there are two opposed answers, the extreme statements of which are both obviously wrong.

On the one (left?) hand, the human mind is a universal Turing machine which can run any type of cultural software. This software should be universally interchangeable, and any incompatibility issues between older and newer versions are therefore attributable to the stubborn intransigence of the user: 'What do you mean you can't open the document I sent you? You what?! You're still running Office '97?!' (Morality '45?) Opponents of this position sometimes unwittingly buy into its presuppositions and say things like 'if only those heathens would turn from their ways and just believe!' No. Unfortunately, it's not that simple.

The opposite position – a bastardised version of which is often co-opted by hard-hearted ne'er-do-wells – runs like this: culture is just a flimsy fig leaf which does a flimsy job of obscuring our primate carnality. In this view of human nature, just as we cannot expect writers in the aggregate to resist the



You're still with me. Thanks! Before getting to my positive answer to the original question, I want to reflect briefly on why the pseudo-position 'it's not nature or nurture, it's both' seems so dissatisfying.

pull of powerful semantic attractors – all instances of 'fig leaf' (and 'bikini') must be preceded by 'flimsy' – so we cannot expect humans in the aggregate to resist the pull of powerful biological attractors, not least our evolved primate psychology. Opponents of this position, too, sometimes unwittingly buy into its presuppositions, and say things like 'religion's just modern-day tribalism run amok, hey?' No. Unfortunately, it's not that simple either.

'How exactly is it not that simple?' It's at this point at which I as reader would think 'alright then, wise-gal/guy, that's all well and good, and you're not wrong, but do you actually have anything to say?' and, depending on my level of acquaintance with and/or appreciation for the writer, either actively resist or happily succumb to the urge to start skimming through the rest of the article for signs of a conclusion, or else go straight to the literally concluding paragraph and, if failing to discover something resembling a conclusion, ask myself whether it seems worthwhile to go back and look for one. Sneak preview: I won't be commencing my positive answer to the question 'is genuinely open-ended dialogue actually part of human nature?' in the very next paragraph, so how you want to play this one is up to you.

You're still with me. Thanks! Before getting to my positive answer to the original question, I want to reflect briefly on why the pseudo-position 'it's not nature or nurture, it's both' seems so dissatisfying. Firstly, I call it a pseudo-position because, as should be pretty obvious, there's a whole spectrum of different possibilities between the straw-man positions sitting respectively at the two poles, not just the four logical possibilities which naturally present themselves to our pre-mathematical minds: nature alone ('the Arctic scarecrow'), nurture alone ('the Antarctic scarecrow'), both and neither.

The main reason why any of the possible permutations of ‘both’ seem so intuitively dissatisfying, I posit, is that they don’t present themselves immediately as clear mandates for action. Whereas the reason why the two scarecrow positions are so alluring\* is that they provide easily graspable decision procedures:

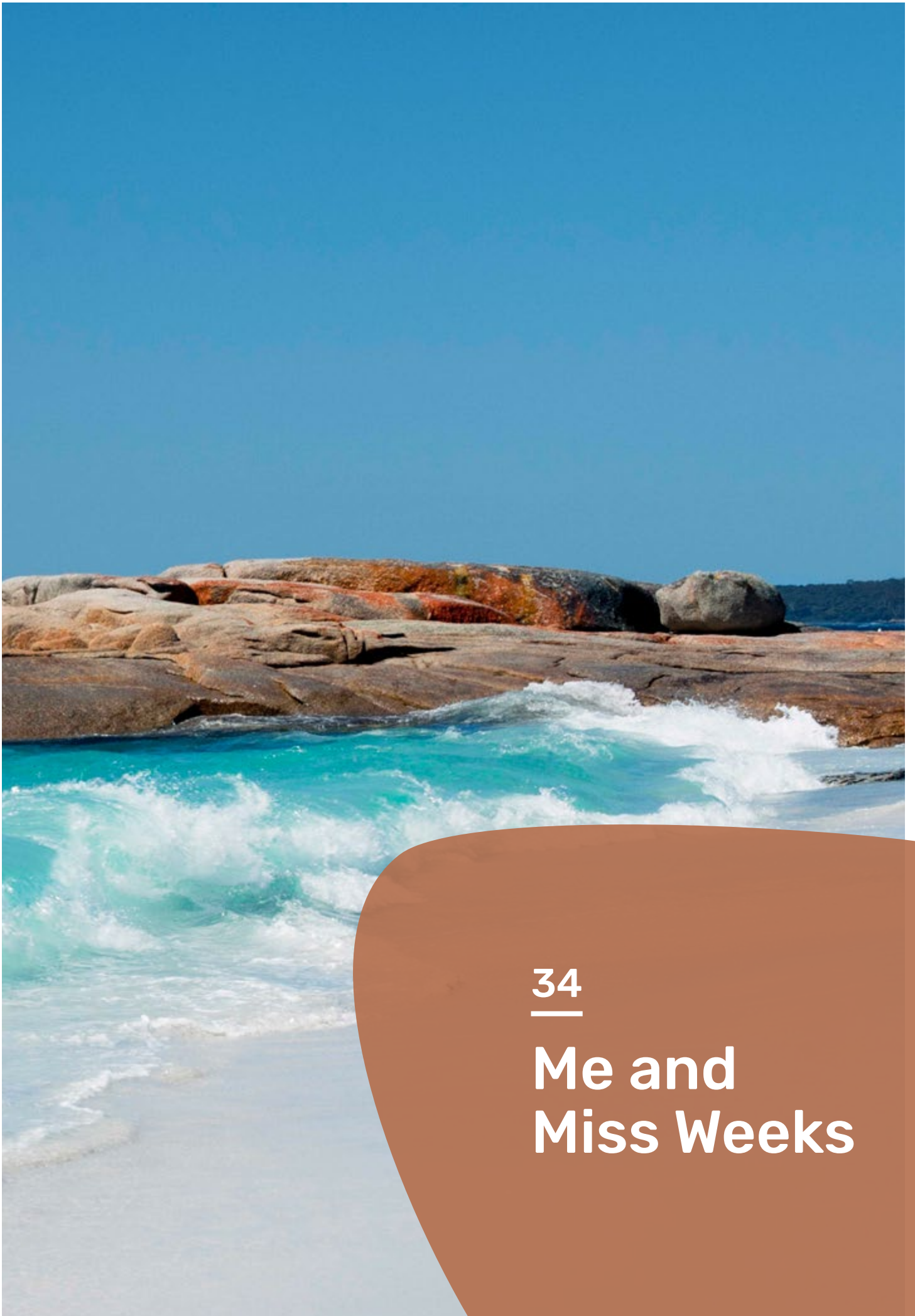
‘Human nature is just culture, human beings are infinitely malleable, it’s all up for grabs. Permanent change to whatever needs changing in yourself – or others! – is possible, you just have to really want it (or cause the others to).’

‘You can’t hope to eradicate your biological propensities just by reason and willpower, that’s a mug’s game and a recipe for disaster. Be content just to be fully aware of them and channel them as best you can, and if you need supernatural help with that, then so be it.’

In contrast with the clarity of the directives issued by the polar scarecrows, the ‘both’ position seems likely to set us adrift on an uncertain sea of possible life courses, making occasional ad hoc use of our little outboard motors, only to give up and save our fuel as we are periodically battered hither and thither by the capricious winds of the meme storms.

So, what’s the answer? (Welcome back.) There are two that I find convincing. Firstly, there is the (jargon warning!) ‘emergent modularity’ of Clark and Wheeler which suggests that our hunter-gatherer psychological dispositions – the very same dispositions which don’t see dialogue as part of human nature, which motivate us not to care about reality, but only to care about whether our version of reality is accepted by the tribe – are themselves emergent from actual life processes, and therefore susceptible to being shaped. Childhood seems to be a critical period for this shaping, and communication drives it. Secondly, Jonathan Haidt has suggested that various conservative groups – whatever other foibles they may have – are adept at utilising our group-oriented social psychology in positive ways from which his fellow liberals could learn, if lines of dialogue were kept open. The thread of commonality in these two answers, as in so many aspects of life, is precisely our current topic: sincere communication characterised by respect and clarity. So is open-ended dialogue part of human nature? A succinct answer is: perhaps it hasn’t always been, but it must be.

\* I am aware that ‘allure’ generally makes for a pretty ineffective scarecrow.



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## Me and Miss Weeks



## Me and Miss Weeks

BY JUDY TIERNEY

A state and national award-winning journalist, Judy Tierney worked with ABC TV and radio for over 35 years. Her community work is wide and varied, and her passionate commitment to the arts has spanned decades.

**H**ow many of you remember the name of your Grade 3 teacher? How many Grade 3 teachers remember the names of their students? And why would or should we – especially if we were born around the time of World War II?

Maybe life was different in just about every way then.

They were turbulent and torturous, trauma-filled days, more than we little ones could possibly understand. There was a dark, largely unspoken underbelly of suffering many of our teachers endured. ‘Don’t talk about the war’.

Home from a hideous battle and back to work as if their experience was a ghastly nightmare. We were pasted on a canvas of images portraying normality. But there were truths and promise of hope, opportunity and genuine goodwill that shone through. We war babies were the recipients of that.

I am writing this because my Grade 3 teacher at Launceston’s Charles Street State School, then Miss June Weeks, has had a profound effect on my life. She hadn’t been to war but it was she who provided that pivotal influence that has been shadowed in the framing of my conscience and desire to succeed for the last 67 years! She nurtured my love of reading and taught me about what unknown wonders opportunity provides. She could bond with even the



Maybe life was different in just about every way then.

most difficult children and, applying the 1940s and '50s teaching methods, believed every child in her class could read. It appeared to be a simple but effective model.

Little did I know until relatively recently that Miss Weeks, now June Schott, remembers me. In fact, she's kept track of my career and the life of other students. She remembers Matthew E who, after regularly not turning up to class, gave her, as an apology, a With All My Love card and a red paper rose. She still has it and told me that Matthew has been in trouble with police over the years and she very much wants him to mend his ways because 'he was such a lovely boy'. She hopes you read this Matthew!

It's 70-odd years since June Schott began collecting cuttings and other paraphernalia about her students. Among them is a piece clipped from a newspaper of a little paragraph where I had been asked in the 1990s what books I was reading and a few words about who had influenced me through my life. To the latter question I immediately added Miss Weeks.

Around that time I had been asked as a journalist to present the ABC's morning current affairs program in Tasmania. June Schott sent me a beautiful card saying how thrilled she was to read that I still remembered her but sadly she didn't provide a forwarding address. Twenty years later I was appointed to the Board of *Island* magazine and one of the other board members, Felicity, said 'Oh my mum taught you in Grade 3'. How excited I was to have found a link and immediately asked Felicity if she would ask her mum to come for morning tea.

I opened the door to greet June and her daughter. There was a diminutive, elegant, softly spoken woman with the unmistakable smile (and tears in her eyes) who had been silently part of my life for so long! What a lot we had to talk about.

*There are many children I never forgot, and I can see you now with the little pig tails and you were such a darling, and of course we moved to Hobart and you were doing 'To Market, To Market'.. "I saw a little column in the weekend paper and they asked you a question about what gave you the love of reading books, Judy, and you said 'I loved the books I got as prizes at school and there was my Grade 3 teacher, Miss Weeks' and I thought, 'God, that was me. Me and I had an influence on Judy'! I can't believe that. And the ABC had an Open Day and I thought I'd love to go and see Judy but I can't. If I do, I'll cry.*

We catch up now and again as June Schott lives only a stone's throw away from my home. Most recently I interviewed her for this article to flesh out what she thinks of teaching methods today. She's not impressed with this State's record of functional illiteracy, claimed to be as high as 48% of the population.

*Sometimes I had combined classes of Grades 1, 2 and 3 and everyone had to read aloud, they would all take turns. I would always discuss the background of the story to extend the children's knowledge of what they were reading to allow it to make more sense. I'm a great fan of rote; I know it wasn't a very exciting way to do it, but it did really work. And the times table and spelling charts, we made them from brown paper. They were valuable tools.*

*Children were polite then, respectful, and children weren't naughty then, Judy, they weren't. Love and kindness is so important. I would have got into terrible trouble today if I became a teacher because we used to touch children, hug children, yes, hug children. You don't dare today. We used to take children to toilets, help them with their toileting, but you know touching is out now – but you can still be kind.*

I clearly remember my entry into Grade 3. The free bottles of warmed milk in crates sat in the bleak quadrangle. My classroom was close, and I peeked in to see the neat rows of wooden desks with two inkwells in each and a little carved groove for your pens (with nibs) and pencils. On the blackboard Miss Weeks had written the word 'opportunity'. I learnt it immediately (to be a smarty I suppose) and I asked June why she had chosen that word. 'This was a new class, a very important class because it was the breaking point between lessons in the infant school and getting ready for a new beginning. Opportunity, open the window, open the door and let new things in and absorb new things. You were all little people but opportunity was waiting.'

Thank you, Miss Weeks, for embedding that in my mind. My life has been truly enriched by grasping opportunity. There were times I forgot to jolt it into action, but it has always been there, a wonderful legacy from a gentle and intelligent woman, Miss Weeks.



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# The Impacts of Trauma







# The Impacts of Trauma

BY JULIA CURTIS & THE STAFF OF THE HOBART WOMEN'S SHELTER

Julia Curtis is the Program Development Manager of the Hobart Women's Shelter. Here, she and the team at the shelter write collaboratively about their work and its implications.

At the Hobart Women's Shelter we have a profile of the 'average' woman seeking assistance to escape homelessness.

- She is aged between 26 and 36 years and two-thirds of the time has children with her.
- Nearly half the time she is escaping family violence and seeking security and safety at the Hobart Women's Shelter.
- And, for an increasing proportion of women, she has spent up to the last six months either sleeping rough, couch surfing or living in other forms of non-conventional accommodation.
- And she could be from anywhere in Tasmania. She could be you.

There is a strong link between the impacts of family violence and educational attainment.

Children of women who flee family violence experience significant interruptions to their education, but the issue is far deeper than discontinued schooling. The underlying issue is the long-term impact of the trauma experienced by the child in the lead up to and the exit from the family home. In some cases the child isn't safe and must be schooled within the crisis

She could be from anywhere in Tasmania. She could be you.

accommodation setting because of risk of violence to both the parent and the child. Or often, the location of the women's shelter is outside the region where the child is attending school which means that the woman seeking assistance must make the difficult choice to keep the family together or to maintain the education of the child.

How can we expect traumatised children to concentrate on their education when support systems are lacking? To understand this we need to unpack the impact of trauma on children and their educational attainment. This is a complex area but research clearly shows that trauma affects children at both physical and emotional levels – and children are acutely aware of the issues as they play out in families in instances of family violence. Children don't forget these experiences and trauma is carried by the child, often throughout their entire life.

One key outcome is a change in the ability of a child to learn. Children who experience trauma, no matter the source, achieve lower scholastic outcomes, often have longer school records and have high rates of unexplained absences from school.

As you would expect, specialist childhood trauma counselling and support services are heavily over-booked and waiting times can be several months. This essay isn't about the issue of overstretched support services. It's a plea for collaboration. Let us work together to establish additional models that specialise in supporting children who have experienced trauma so that children can access supports faster. In concert with this approach is the need to support teachers to recognise and refer students who are experiencing trauma from family violence. We need to look after those who are supporting our children's education.

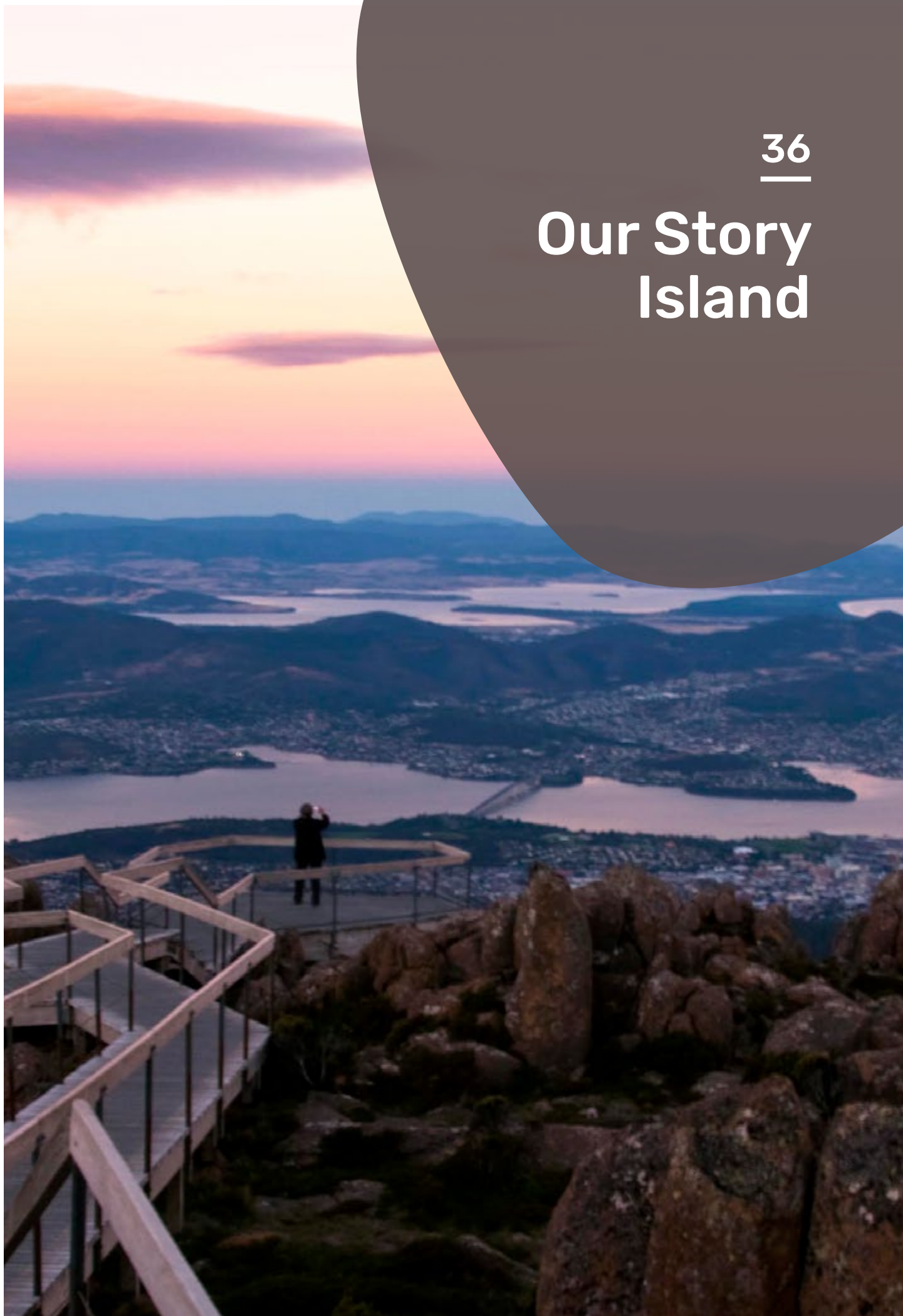
At the Hobart Women's Shelter we provide support, housing and advocacy for women and children experiencing homelessness and all forms of violence. Our role is to provide a safe place for women and their children in the short term, but the impacts of violence on children are long term and can change the course of a child's life. By collaborating on getting key supports in early and supporting those in our education system to recognise the signs of trauma we may be able to change the outcomes for young Tasmanian lives.



*Something to think about: Children are important. We need to work collaboratively to support children who have experienced trauma because it is complex, it impacts all facets of their lives, and we want these kids to have a chance at a bright future.*

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# Our Story Island







## Our Story Island

BY KATE GROSS & EMILY BULLOCK

The Story Island Project is a Hobart-based non-profit organisation that supports young people to improve their literacy skills through creative storytelling.

Co-founder Emily Bullock is a writer and teacher in the university, public education and community sectors.

Co-founder Kate Gross is a freelance writer and editor.

For more than three years, the Story Island Project has run creative storytelling projects with disadvantaged young people in the broader Hobart area. Through these projects, in which young people's written and illustrated stories are widely celebrated through publication or public display, we have witnessed the power of story to open up opportunities for young people to enhance their literacy skills and imagine their worlds differently.

We, like most Tasmanians, were shocked by THAT statistic: that almost half of Tasmanians don't have the written language skills needed to get by in their daily lives.

It's a statistic that means many Tasmanians face huge barriers to achieving everyday tasks that many of us take for granted, like filling in important paperwork or reading public signs and notices.

It's a statistic that means many young Tasmanians fail to achieve at school, compounding problems like poor attendance and disengagement from school.

## Almost half of Tasmanians don't have the written language skills needed to get by in their daily lives.

It's a statistic that has motivated many in the Tasmanian community to take action to promote and improve literacy in areas of need. The Story Island Project's approach promotes literacy development through the lens of creativity, addressing another unfortunate and not insignificant impact of Tasmania's 'literacy problem'. As one teacher who has worked closely with us observed, students in low socioeconomic areas of Tasmania are too often 'denied the basic right of imagination, through having to prioritise a need to survive, or to endure'.

Our close partnerships with schools have facilitated unique opportunities for young people to flourish. The schools that we have worked with have recognised our approach as a distinct opportunity for young people, carving out time and space from an increasingly crowded curriculum to allow their students to think creatively.

And there is creativity all around them! In our workshops, we encourage young people to see creative potential in the most seemingly mundane and everyday of things. Our authentic projects involve real-world places and people, so young people can see the relevance of creative thinking to 'the real world' and increase their awareness of and participation in the communities around them.

Last year, we worked on a large storytelling project that encouraged young people to craft stories about the Brooker Highway – a place right on the doorsteps of their schools. Through our series of creative workshops, we came to see the true, transformative power of story in action. One young person told us they came to 'think differently about everyday things', seeing the creative potential of something as familiar as their local highway. Another participant realised, 'you can make a story of anything'.

In our work with young people, we have witnessed the power of creative projects to build young people's confidence in their ability to express their thoughts and ideas, and their enthusiasm for telling their own stories – true and imagined.

Our storytelling workshops provide a fun, safe and inclusive environment, where young people feel free to be creative. We build their confidence by giving them ‘real life’ roles as authors, illustrators, editors and designers in creative projects that have a ‘real life’ outcome: a book, an exhibition, a public reading.

Local writers and artists join us in our workshops to work alongside young people, giving them advice and encouragement – not as teachers or other authority figures, but as ‘fellow creatives’. Some students told us that one of the most valuable parts of these workshops was ‘seeing a process through from inception to completion’. One teacher said that she valued the workshops for bringing writing and illustration together in one project, forms which are ‘too often separated in secondary learning’, allowing ‘students who were visual as well as written storytellers to flourish’.

As young people have seen their creative ideas come to life, we have seen them grow in their confidence to put forward ideas in a group and share their work with their peers. We’ve even heard stories of young people who have never shared their work with teachers, seeking out teachers to share the stories they’ve created in our workshops. We’ve been moved to see young people read their work aloud before an audience at public events – alongside award-winning authors and esteemed artists – and discuss their work in live radio interviews.

Our vision for a Tasmania where everyone has the confidence and creativity to tell their own stories is big and bold. But if the young people we have worked with in the past few years are anything to go by, the rewards are enormous for everyone.



*Something to think about: We encourage community members to join us in building a more confident, creative Tasmanian community.*



# Turning the Page







## Turning the Page

BY KEITH HINDE

Keith Hinde is a community service practitioner with 10 years' experience in housing and homelessness support. He currently works as the coordinator of the Red Cross Prison Support Program, a pre-release program in Risdon Prison. He is interested in narrative criminology and the process of desistance. Keith is currently completing a Professional Honours in Human Service Practice through the University of Tasmania.

I don't read as much as I used to. Like so many people I know, my patterns of reading experienced a drop off, perhaps due to technology, laziness or general distraction.

I have joined a book club, one in which everyone reads the same book every month and then we discuss it. My brother goes to the same club in a different city. Sometimes we talk about the book over the phone, which has been cool.

There is a vast difference though, between being aware of the importance of reading and translating that to completing actual books. There is such an avalanche, such an overkill of information and ideas out there that most of them don't get more than a cursory glance. I can't be the only one. But I am trying to turn it around.

*We are not only what we read, we are how we read.*

Maryanne Wolf

## We are not only what we read, we are how we read.

I'm the coordinator of the Red Cross Prison Support Program here in Tasmania, and I notice that many people in prison pass the time reading books or newspapers. Some who arrive at prison not knowing how to read end up learning just to pass the time, although some of the same people may find writing and spelling more difficult.

Reading widely, becoming immersed, exploring ideas deeply, and finding inspiration – this is an opportunity that can be taken up almost anywhere, even behind the razor wire.

I am usually in the education area, so maybe my perception is skewed. There are certainly literacy issues with the prison population, but I find that many incarcerated people enjoy reading and have a good grasp of current events or have a favourite book series.

Another explanation may be that the lack of phones, social media, internet, Netflix and so on causes people to actually spend the time to read a full book or article, as opposed to those 'on the outside' – who are probably all guilty of skim-reading, falling into hyperlink rabbit-holes, jumping from webpage to webpage, and scrolling through their news-feed.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, I end up having really good conversations with the prison group. There is time and space to explore opinions and concepts. Reading does offer those who are locked-up a pathway toward something beyond the drudgery of the yard – a way to focus, to concentrate, to sharpen up their analysis. So the discussion goes further than the headlines and soundbites, and towards the bigger picture and the real issues.

Mark Edmundson, author of *Why Read*, explains that we are socialised once, from family, teachers, and so on, and for some those values work. But others, 'for whatever reason, just don't fit right into the established values'. He goes on to say that one of the best ways forward is that they sometimes become obsessed readers, reading until they find people who see the world in the same way they do, and 'they feel as if they are home, with a second set of parents, a second set of teachers, and can start to see the world for themselves'.

I remember hearing another interview with a novelist, and he expressed a similar sentiment. He said that as a young man he knew he didn't agree with the values of the society he was in, but wanted to be a part of that society nonetheless. I could relate to that myself.

I think a lot of people who are locked in Risdon Prison are re-examining some of their choices, and many say that they are feeling that same way. Although our circumstances and residences may be different, I sometimes feel like we are all trying to break away to some degree, and find some sense of home.

*I'd forgotten how beautiful the world was. When I first went to prison the outside world held no attraction for me. Now I looked out with desire. I wanted to take part. I wanted to live out there, like a regular, decent law abiding citizen.*

Erwin James, *Redeemable: A Memoir of Darkness and Hope*





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**Together We  
Can Do So  
Much More**





## Together We Can Do So Much More

BY KIM BACKHOUSE

Kim Backhouse lectures law at the University of Tasmania. She is also the CEO of the Foster and Kinship Carers Association of Tasmania.

I recently went to the cinema to see a blockbuster animation *Early Man*, in which one of the main characters tells a tribe of cave people (who are generally down on life at this point in the storyline), ‘if we work together, we might just get this done’. This is akin to the sentiment in Helen Keller’s call for collaboration used as the title of this piece.

My role as the CEO for the Foster and Kinship Carers Association (FKAT) is similar: if I do not collaborate in this landscape with the many stakeholders in the out-of-home-care space and the community sector as a whole, then my role naturally becomes more challenging, demanding and isolating. Working in any silo environment really does not provide many benefits, either organisationally or for the community of our extraordinary foster and kinship carers in Tasmania.

So, with a passion and vision to strive towards achieving a systematic outcome in relation to support and advocacy for all foster and kinship carers in Tasmania, and a desire for foster and kinship carers to have better access to training and resources, I thought (with the support of the board) that it was necessary to seek additional funding elsewhere as the available government funding for FKAT does not allow us to truly fulfil our strategic vision, plan or approach for carers in Tasmania.

## If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go with others

As you can appreciate, many individuals, stakeholders and organisations contact me daily in this role on many issues, which are in most cases not without challenges. Fortunately for FKAT, I had the privilege of being contacted in 2016 by an insightful representative of the Sidney Myer Fund who (like myself) recognised the importance of the role that foster and kinship carers play within our community.

From the initial meeting, the relationship has grown from the desire to provide better support for carers in Tasmania and an overall spirit of collaboration to a generous capacity-building grant from the Sidney Myer Fund (one of only four grants nationally by the fund at that time), which is to be completed in October 2018. With this grant and the relationships that I have formed along the way, I believe that working collaboratively is the only way to go. As an African proverb states: 'if you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go with others'. While I am keen for the Out Of Home Care reform to be faster, I recognise that as a community we need this particular reform to be successful not only for the sake of all carers but also for the children and young people in our care and for the community at large.

It is so important to recognise that a goal shared with other people or stakeholders can be achieved sooner through collaboration. I believe that leadership is synonymous with collaboration, and only with collaboration can your full vision or strategic focus be crystallised and truly realised.

Resources and skilled support with wrap-around services are required right now. When recognition, collaboration and resources come into the sector, this may be achieved locally, nationally and internationally. Building trust, respect and validity with your purpose will inevitably open doors and provide opportunities for collaboration and success.

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# The Grown-Up Conversation We Need to Have







# The Grown-Up Conversation We Need to Have

BY KRISTEN DESMOND

Kristen Desmond is a mum, advocate and founder of the Tasmanian Disability Education Reform Lobby. Kristen was named Launceston's Citizen of the Year in 2016 in recognition of tireless advocacy.

**T**he students for whom I advocate may have a diagnosed or undiagnosed disability but they all have the same issue: school simply doesn't cater to their learning needs. When I hear stories of young people who couldn't follow the path they wanted to university because they couldn't finish Year 12, and I use those words deliberately, they couldn't finish Year 12 because the system didn't support them to learn in a way that worked for them, I am frustrated. Frustrated that as a community we have let these young people down, and make no mistake we have.

I reflect on our education system and I wonder why we can't have a real policy debate and design an education system that meets the needs of all students. I think I know the answer and I am frustrated by it. Many will tell me it's because we don't have the money, or money won't fix the problem, and in some ways, that's true, but you know what, the reality is we are too busy looking to lay blame on governments or principals or teachers or parents for the failings of the system rather than as a community having the grown-up conversations we need to have to fix the Tasmanian education system.



I find it hard to fathom why we as a community can't sit down and have a real conversation.

I find it hard to fathom why we as a community can't sit down and have a real conversation, warts and all, about the state of our Education system. Listening to stories of parents who are crying out for help because they have tried to advocate for their child and ended up in a fight with school because the school has turned the situation into us against them and it was never intended to be that way.

I reflect on my early years in the education system with my children. My earliest memories are of a system that almost broke me, because my children needed support and it was almost impossible for me to get it for them. I'm a pretty strong person but the system brought me to my knees.

Then I think about those students who had teachers and schools that really understood their needs and they have succeeded in gaining entry to university or an apprenticeship and are set up to succeed in life. Whether we want to face the fact or not, our education system is failing some children and I for one am determined to ensure that we make it better and ultimately see an education system that does meet the needs of all children.

Many will say that I'm dreaming and that this type of system will never exist. We find any number of excuses to justify a system that is broken. Putting our kids' education in the too-hard basket is not an option and as a community, as a state, we need to have conversations, real conversations, where we park our egos at the door, recognise that there are issues that need to be solved, and solve them.

We need to keep politics out of the education debate. We need to have real conversations where people respect each other's views and understand that policy development comes if we truly listen to each other, take the best ideas and design a system that will succeed.

There is no silver bullet to fix the issues we face in our schools, the only way to really fix the system is to have the difficult conversations instead of simply focusing on criticising each other and turning a robust policy debate into a ‘who is right’ debate which helps no one.

There is no short-term fix; our children’s futures depend on getting the education policy settings right. It’s time to stop blaming politicians, schools and parents for the state we find our education system in. In fact, it’s time to stop blaming full stop. It’s time to focus on the strengths of the system and build on that. Everyone wants an education system that sets our children up for success, but the real question is are we willing to do what it takes to achieve it? I’m willing, are you?



*Something to think about: How can you contribute to education reform in Tasmania?*

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# The Intentional Mindset





## The Intentional Mindset

BY LARISSA BARTLETT

Larissa Bartlett has more than 20 years' experience working in business, government and research organisations, with a focus on productive partnerships and community engagement. She is currently a PhD candidate at the Menzies Institute investigating the potential of mindfulness practice for stress reduction and other outcomes relevant to work.

In his thought-provoking little book *On Dialogue*, David Bohm suggests that when people engage in productive dialogue, they are not taking instruction, but working together to create something in common. Defined as a process of frank and open discussion around an issue of importance, productive dialogue is where new ideas emerge to move things forward.

Bohm refers to a certain mindset that can cultivate and hold the spaciousness needed for productive dialogue to occur. This mindset is one that is intentionally aware, open and non-judging attitude, and it underpins contemporary theories of authentic leadership put forward by Avolio and Luthans, and Kabat-Zinn's theory of mindfulness. Evidence indicates this type of intentional mindset enables unbiased processing and relational transparency, which in turn foster honesty, curiosity and open cooperation.

It is common, however, for us to approach difficult interactions with a mix of fear and desire. But when we are fearful, we engage behaviours that minimise threat, like defensiveness or avoidance. And when we are desire-full our attention is blinkered, focused on an ideal outcome. When fear and desire are dominant, our ability to be curious, value differing perspectives and nurture the emergence of something unknown is curtailed.



Now that you know the name, shape and feel of it, you can park your baggage to the side.

So, what can we do to engage the right mindset for productive dialogue around issues that matter to us?

I want you to imagine a meeting. I suggest a meeting because meetings are purposeful, usually arranged to move things forward. There is a topic, intention and role for each attendee. Yours can be ANY kind of meeting – an appointment with a lawyer, a committee meeting, the first dinner with your potential in-laws. Try to conjure a scene that is realistic for you, where the topic of the intended dialogue is meaningful.

In your scenario, you are prepared. You have a clear idea of what you want to achieve, and some understanding of the fears and desires of the others. Some of the issues that need to be addressed are sticky and you anticipate resistance and defensiveness.

Now, imagine, in the few moments before your meeting, you take a few quiet minutes to acknowledge what has brought you to this moment. Become aware of how you feel. Notice your own fears and desires. You may have an increased heart rate, or be sitting on the edge of your seat ready for a challenge. Just notice the story in your mind, and your reaction to it – like you would as an observer of the situation. Try not to dwell or elaborate on what you notice, but acknowledge its indisputable presence: *it is what it is*.

Consider this back story, with its fears and desires, your ‘baggage’ of this moment. Now that you know the name, shape and feel of it, you can park your baggage to the side.

Now, establish your intention to carry into dialogue this open and non-judging awareness that you have given yourself, and make a commitment to hold this openness in dialogue, to allow the germination of something as yet unknown.

The others are tense, and determined to make themselves heard.

Their journey to the meeting may have been stressful: perhaps they failed in the past to have their opinions heard about this issue; perhaps they were rushing to arrive on time in the face of some adversity beyond their control. They may be struggling to retain focus on the matter at hand. They may be certain they have the one big answer.

They've made an effort to get there. They arrive with fears and desires.

Indeed, each of the people at the table has baggage, not just you. They may not have stopped to take stock of theirs. They may have walked into the meeting and plonked their baggage right down on the table to hide behind, or be waving it about so it can be noticed. They may be hiding their baggage, or ready to defend it. One thing is certain, everyone at your meeting has baggage.

Acknowledge their back stories, the legitimacy of their fears and desires. Retain your intentional mindset.

Because you have acknowledged and parked yours, you have space to notice the baggage of others. You can acknowledge their back stories and the different perspectives they bring.

Because you acknowledge their perspectives, you can better hear what is said. Because they feel heard, they will feel valued and safe to share their honest views.

If you all feel valued, heard and safe, you are well positioned to focus with openness and curiosity on the topic being discussed.

The powerful element in this dialogue setting is your intentional mindset. With this mindset, fears and desires can be accommodated, frank discussion can be had, and new ideas can emerge.

Think for a moment how things may have gone if you hadn't taken those few minutes to prepare.

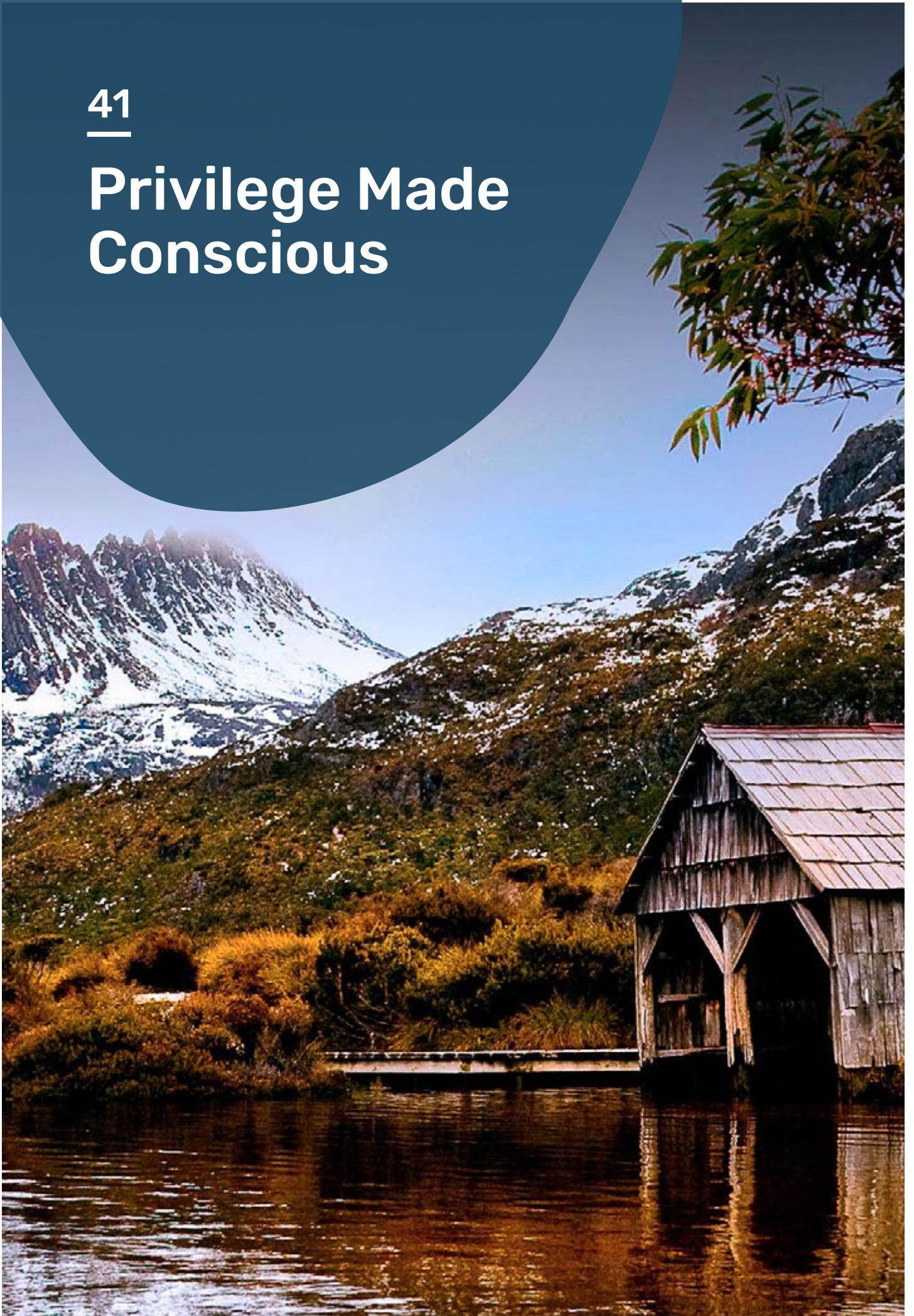


*Something to think about: What do you think is needed to help you cultivate this intentional attitude?*



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# Privilege Made Conscious







# Privilege Made Conscious

BY LEANNE MINSHULL

Leanne Minshull is the director of the Tasmanian branch of the Australia Institute and a small business owner in Hobart.

I grew up in a family of readers and debaters. One of my earliest memories is sitting in Nan's bedroom with Nan, Mum and I all reading. Years later, living back at Nan's as a young single mother with my daughter, I had a strong sense of déjà vu sitting in Nan's bedroom but this time with 4 generations of women reading. My daughter was only 2 but she was sitting with her book mimicking her elders. We also spent most nights of the week debating current affairs around the kitchen table. In my world, ideas and words mattered and all of us used them as weapons to make our way through the world.

Illiteracy, as I saw it, was something that happened to other people. Looking back, I'm sure my subconscious thought patterns around this were condescending and, worse, patronising. Without really thinking about it I'm pretty sure I saw illiteracy as something that happened to a particular group of people and that it was the government's responsibility to provide these people with the tools to help them help themselves. In short, I had a lefty benevolence complex that lacked any real understanding or depth – hey, if we were perfect we would be in Nirvana already, right?

Being lucky enough to move overseas for work for a few years in my mid 40s put me on a steep learning curve for language, literacy and how it affects all areas of your life. My husband and I went to live in Amsterdam. Have you ever listened to a group of Dutch people in a group talking excitedly? Probably not. Dutch isn't really spoken much outside of the Netherlands as 95% of Dutch are proficient in English. I thought I had landed on the set of *Sesame Street* and



## How individuals interacted with me taught me my biggest lesson.

everyone was doing Swedish chef impersonations. I desperately wanted to integrate myself as much as possible into my new community, but I couldn't speak the language. Language both shapes and reflects culture; until you speak the lingo, it's very hard to really 'get' the culture.

I failed miserably at learning Dutch. But here are some of the things I learnt from not being able to read (or speak) the language. It is incredibly frustrating dealing with bureaucracy and being at the whim of whatever mood the person behind the counter is in. I had no chance of negotiating the system when I couldn't read the notices that were sent to me. This severely curtails your ability to try to get the best deal for yourself. You also have to cope with people looking at you like you are an idiot.

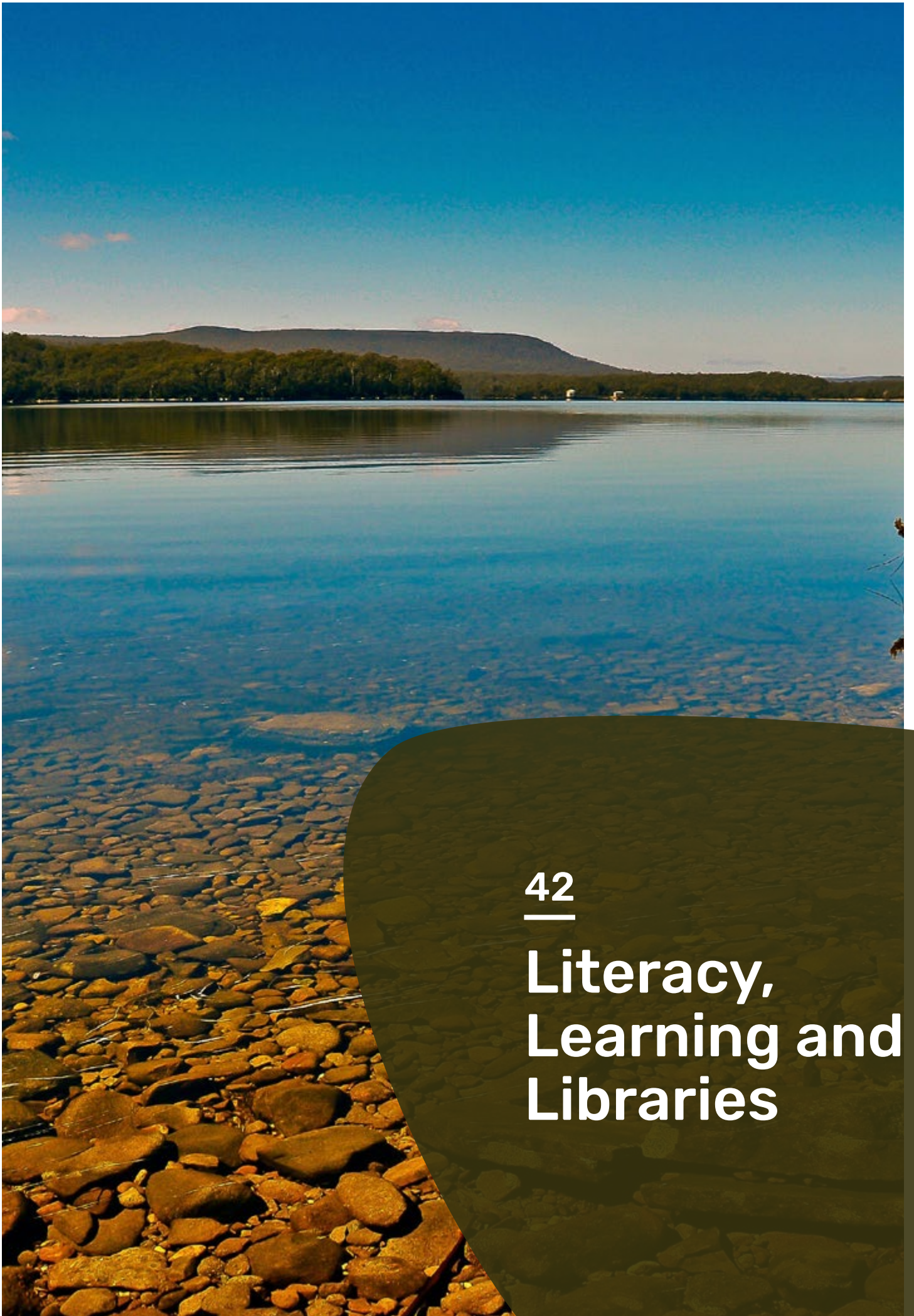
Simple things like reading the instructions on the medicine bottle became a source of immense stress – yes, the doctor told me the dose but I couldn't always remember what she had said. I missed several trains by mixing up going to somewhere and coming from somewhere. For my first month I was exhausted – everything was so foreign and doing what used to be simple tasks took about 25% more effort. By 5 pm my brain had done enough work for it to be 11 pm.

All of these stresses were minor in comparison to how my social life was changed. When socialising with Dutch friends I couldn't talk about current affairs unless I had seen it on the TV. I couldn't discuss latest book releases. I often hesitated when contributing to conversations, second-guessing myself. Dutch friends would talk in English when I was in the group but it was clear that they would prefer to be speaking in their native language – and fair enough too.

This also happened in the context of having a very privileged experience. First, I was an Expat – a class of person seen by the natives as sometimes annoying but legitimate (as opposed to refugees, but that is another story). Second, because 95% of Dutch people speak English they were always willing to speak in English rather than Dutch.

How individuals interacted with me taught me my biggest lesson. When colleagues, strangers and officials saw me as an equal we found a way to bridge the divide and the experience was enriched for both of us. One thing I learnt very quickly was that when people collaborated with me – rather than ‘helped’ me – my learning and my emotional experience were both a lot better off.

If we want our country to be one where nobody feels inadequate or has to struggle with reading a prescription, catching a bus or engaging in life fully, we need to realise that those of us who can aren’t better – we have just had different learning experiences and genetic coding.



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# Literacy, Learning and Libraries



## Literacy, Learning and Libraries

BY LIZ JACK

Liz Jack is a former Olympic diver and coach and currently the Director of LINC Tasmania. A Tasmanian by birth, Liz has also lived interstate and overseas, including in Montreal, where she completed her BA (Hons) in Modern Languages at McGill University.

Some of my earliest childhood memories are of sitting at home with one of my parents or grandparents, repeating nursery rhymes and listening to stories; some told straight from their heads, but most read to me from the many books we always had on hand. My later memories include trying to help my mum solve her crossword puzzles well before I was able to spell all the ‘big’ words, and sneaking a torch into my bedroom so that I could read under the covers well after lights-out.

I took literacy for granted. I was one of the lucky ones. But when I began my coaching career I realised not everyone was as fortunate. It was as the coach of a large diving club in Montreal, Canada that I was first exposed to the fact that not everyone has the levels of literacy and numeracy they need. For some families who came to enrol their young, aspiring champions for lessons, completing a simple application form was a chore – whether they spoke English or French. Their embarrassment and discomfort is indelibly imprinted in my mind.



## No adult learner is the same.

When I joined LINC Tasmania just over 12 months ago, I realised that, among other things, I would have the opportunity to help address the ‘wicked problem’ that faces us with the low levels of literacy and numeracy in Tasmania. As our statewide public library service, LINC Tasmania is in the unique position of being able to offer support to adults living with low-level literacy. Using our established network of urban and regional libraries throughout Tasmania, our 25 literacy coordinators work with a pool of trained volunteers to provide literacy and numeracy learning to people in their local communities.

No adult learner is the same. Libraries can provide the flexible, client-focussed and individually-tailored learning programs needed for people who are unable, or perhaps feel too uncomfortable, to participate in formal education.

Our learners come from all walks of life and include people struggling with the demands of workplace literacy (which has risen as a result of technology), people with dyslexia, people from non-English-speaking backgrounds, early school leavers, people with intellectual disabilities, and people within the justice system.

Since the LINC Tasmania literacy program began in 2010, we’ve had many inspiring successes. Some are truly life-changing, such as Ian’s story of making an informed vote for the first time at our recent state election, or Mark’s story of sending his first workplace email and, in the process, securing his future employment. Others may appear less momentous, but are equally significant for those who have struggled with low literacy throughout their lives. John told his tutor recently that ‘I spent four hours reading yesterday. Can you believe that? My wife was getting annoyed ...’ Reading had always been a struggle for John, and never enjoyable. Since starting literacy tutoring at his local library, John’s reading fluency has improved so much that reading is no longer a chore, but something he wants to do.

One of the strengths of LINC Tasmania’s literacy program is our ability to offer clients pathways to ongoing learning. Many literacy clients enrol in our digital skills courses, because – as with Mark – their low literacy has stopped them from using technology to communicate.

We also offer short programs designed to engage our hard-to-reach learners, providing soft entry into one-on-one literacy or numeracy tutoring. These are run throughout the state, and also within the community corrections and prison services. Learners in Risdon Prison recently participated in our *Tales from the SLAMmer* program, which used slam poetry to engage learners. Another popular project is *Garden to Plate*, a partnership between LINC Tasmania, training organisations and local community groups, which Angela, who was referred to us by her job services provider, recently completed. She began her learning journey working one-to-one with a tutor, then completed LINC Tasmania’s four-week *Basic Computing* course, followed by *First Steps at the LINC* and now *Garden to Plate*.

Angela says ‘... I started working with a tutor one day a week and doing work at home. I didn’t think it was going to help but it is although I wish I could make even faster progress. I’m working really hard . . . Before I was terrified of doing lots of things that other people take for granted, like catching a bus and buying a Greencard. I’m getting confident about filling in forms now ...’

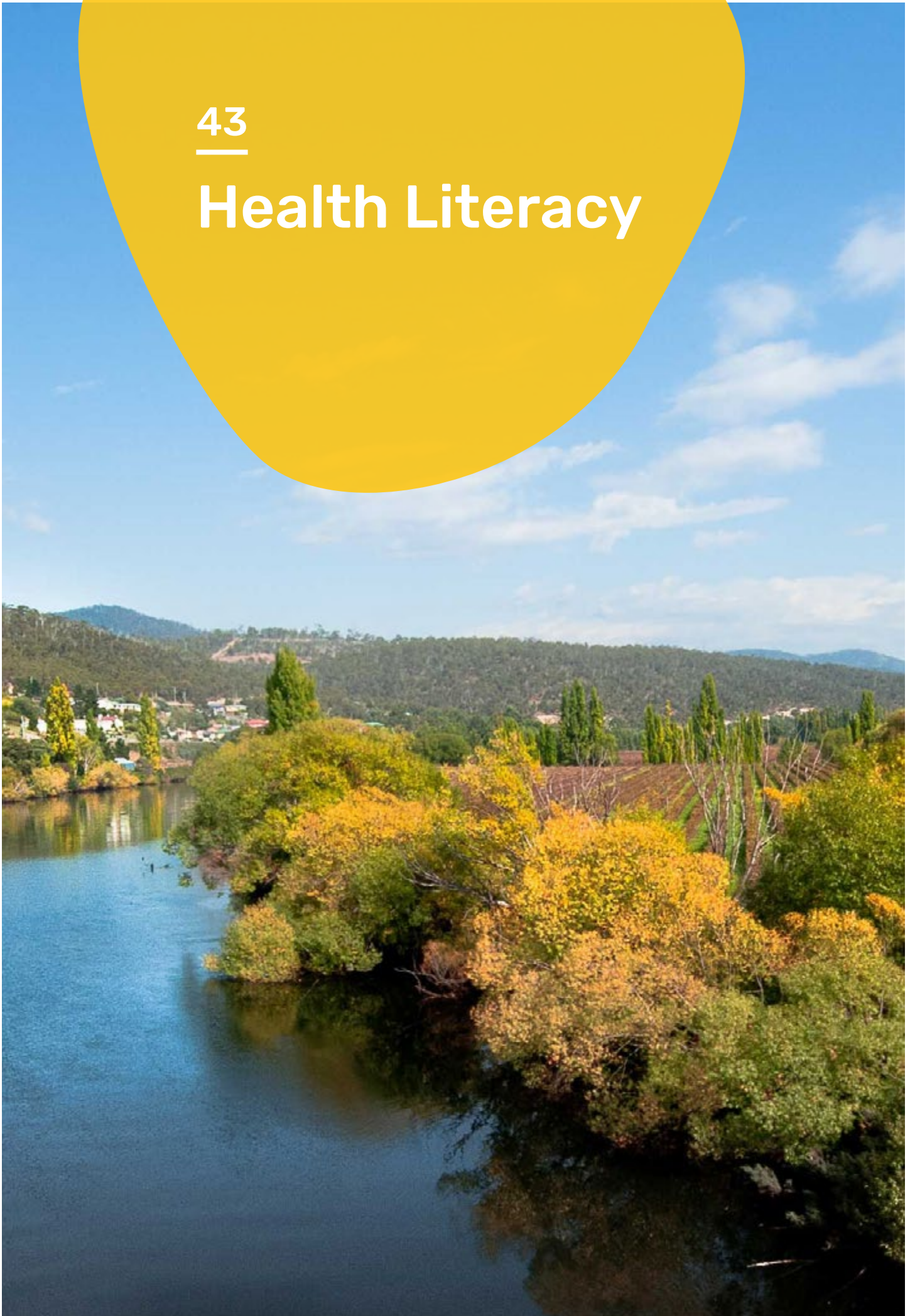
Stories such as Angela’s, Mark’s and John’s tell us we’re making a difference to people’s lives. But many more Tasmanians still need our help and support. Only through our collective and ongoing efforts will we achieve the lofty goal of creating a Tasmania where all adults have the reading, writing, numeracy and communication skills they need for life in a technologically-rich world.



*Something to think about: Whose responsibility is it to solve the literacy and numeracy problem in Tasmania?*

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# Health Literacy





# Health Literacy

BY LUCY BYRNE & PENNY TERRY

Tasmanian sisters Lucy Byrne and Penny Terry founded Healthy Tasmania Pty Ltd to help people live the best life they can. They are ‘community organisers’ who prioritise collaboration, innovation and storytelling while managing projects that improve the health, social and economic outcomes of our communities.

‘ve got a job for you. I’ll be honest, it’s a big job. Not big in time; big in impact. I’ll outline the job description in a moment but first I want to tell you a few stories.

## A man and a bed pan

A local man, who we’ll call Ian, walked into his local neighbourhood house and asked if there was a bed pan he could borrow. One of the workers had been trained by a local initiative called The Right Place and respectfully ‘checked in’ with Ian to find out why he wanted one. Ian said it was for his wife as she’d just become incontinent. Ian had been her carer for four years. The worker asked Ian if he’d had the community care team come to his house for an assessment. Ian said he didn’t even realise the service existed. They soon arranged an assessment and it wasn’t long before a nurse was visiting Ian and his wife regularly and they were set up with practical help including waterproof sheets and a bed pan.



The 2006 Australian Health Survey tells us 63% of adults in Tasmania do not have adequate health literacy skills to manage their health and wellbeing. This is higher than all other states and territories.

### **Metho, coke and lice**

In a small rural community, a group of frustrated parents attended an information session about head lice. Earlier community discussions had revealed lice was a significant ongoing problem causing social, health and economic issues. It was so significant a problem, that parents were trying anything they could to help their kids but hadn't known where to get the right information. Some tried pouring Coca-Cola on their children's heads, some had used methylated spirits, while others had put flea collars on their kids as they couldn't afford the expensive lice products. The stories that came out at this session led to further education sessions and the donation of a big box of lice shampoo for the community.

### **Are you cereal?**

Sarah knew she needed some help to start living a healthier life, so she'd begun attending a free community program. She really enjoyed a particular session about healthy eating and proudly turned up to the next session with a cut-up cereal box to show the coordinator she was no longer eating pies and pastries for breakfast. This was a big step for Sarah. However, the cereal she'd chosen contained about eight teaspoons of sugar per 100g of cereal. Sarah's got a few more steps ahead of her, but she's still a step up from where she started.

These are real Tasmanian stories. They are all examples of poor 'health' literacy and how profoundly and how often it affects people's lives. The hard work being done in the community made a difference in all these cases, which is a great start.

Low literacy levels in Tasmania means 48% of us can't read and write well enough to manage daily life. When it comes to 'health literacy' that figure jumps significantly. The 2006 Australian Health Survey tell us 63% of adults in Tasmania do not have adequate health literacy skills to manage their health and wellbeing. This is higher than all other states and territories. It means people struggle to fill out forms, find help when they need it, remember or understand health information and they are less able to detect or prevent a health problem. When our health budget continues to be burdened by preventable illness, 100% of us are affected.

Part of our job is to continue to advocate for more funding for preventable health so the sorts of programs that have helped Ian, Sarah and the willing group of parents can continue to help more people better manage their own health.

## **Your job?**

Start telling people your 'good' health stories. If you've found a service in Tasmania's health system that's helped you, tell someone who may benefit from it too. If you've learnt how to properly read the back of a cereal box, run a friend through it. If you've been walking on a great local trail, take someone with you. If you've been for a check-up at the GP that possibly saved your life, encourage someone to do the same. It might just give that someone the confidence they need to know 'It's okay to ask'. Let's use real stories to help share good, reliable and practical information that will make Tasmanians better equipped to look after themselves. I told you the job was big, but it's also easy. Share your story and improve health literacy.

A coastal landscape featuring a rocky shore in the foreground, waves breaking on the beach, and a cloudy sky. The water is a mix of green and blue, and the rocks are dark and jagged. In the background, there are hills and a large cliff face.

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## An Aboriginal VET Perspective



## An Aboriginal VET Perspective

BY LYNDEL HOLTON

Lyndel Holton is a Tasmanian Aboriginal woman managing Aboriginal training programs.

**H**aving worked in Aboriginal Vocational Education and Training for the past 25 years I have seen the impact of low literacy levels on my community firsthand. This has often been as a result of poor or, in some cases, no educational experiences. From our youth of today who have seemingly successfully completed Year 10, 11, or 12 studies yet still have low literacy skills, to our Elders, it has had an impact on our community.

To live in today's world, literacy or lack of it impacts greatly on our ability to do basic everyday tasks, and with the emergence of digital literacy, the goal posts have again moved.

I have on so many occasions seen our people aspire to be or do something but be held back or completely rejected because they do not have the literacy and, to a lesser degree, numeracy skills to participate in the training to achieve their vocational goals.

Our youth, not only Aboriginal, but collectively, have become even more illiterate with texting and emojis replacing the written word. The basic use of grammar and comprehension is almost a thing of the past, yet academically these are vital skills to achieve success in study.



It took six years to find it, but in the end, it was absolutely worth it.

However, all is not lost. Like most things, there are successes, but sometimes these successes take time and effort and most importantly perseverance by not only the individual but the organisations involved.

We as a society are always looking at quick outcomes and cold hard facts, yet a lot of highly successful outcomes in Aboriginal student achievement in my area have not been simply a quantitative measure of competent or not competent, but more a qualitative measure of small but impactful success stories. For example, an Elder who after 50 years can now complete a bank withdrawal form without assistance, which in the past came at a risk by relying on others to withdraw money from her account. Or a 40-something community member who couldn't write his name on his enrolment form, but after six years in a basic literacy/numeracy return-to-study program went on to complete his Cert IV in Community Services and is successfully working in this field and giving back to the community that gave him support when he needed it.

Often the greatest barrier for my community is overcoming poor past educational experiences and taking the first step to gain back control – this really is the hardest. There are some excellent support mechanisms in place to assist Aboriginal people wanting to return to study, however to achieve the greatest impact or best outcomes these need to align better.

There needs to be understanding that one or two years to rebuild a lifetime of illiteracy is not always achievable; it can take three, four, five or even six years to do this. Outcomes need to be measured both qualitatively and quantitatively. Celebrating small successes is important.

I recall one student in particular who had attempted, for many years, to gain a qualification. He had enrolled in eight different courses over six years, each time withdrawing half-way through. We had set up a program in collaboration with another funding program that would offer a holistic approach to training and employment. We would offer the training and the partner would seek employment opportunities for the successful completers. When the student

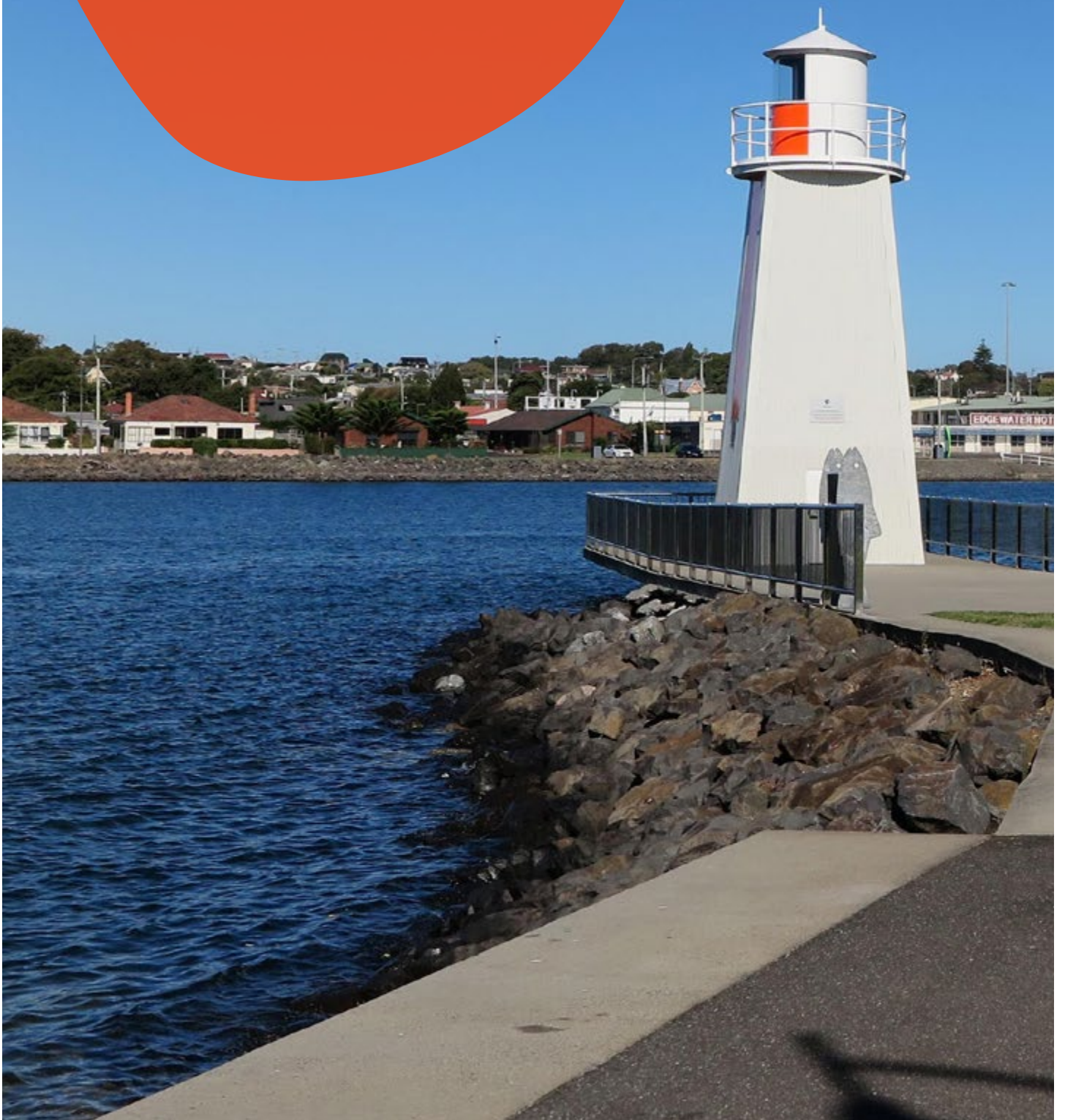
who was the serial enroller expressed interest in the course, we were reluctant, but decided we would place him in the program. It turned out to be the right decision, with him completing the course, gaining an adult apprenticeship, going on to complete the full trade qualification and being awarded Apprentice of the Year by his industry group. He said that with every failed course, from an academic or funding perspective, he gained more return-to-study and literacy skills and, more importantly, confidence, but was struggling to find 'the one', until this one. It took six years to find it, but in the end, it was absolutely worth it.

My community has always promoted and supported self-determination for our people, and one of the keys to achieving this is through the power of education. The ability to read, understand, comprehend and make considered choices or decisions as a result is what self-determination is all about.

I firmly believe that we can overcome poor literacy, but like most things it takes a community and committed people to drive and support it and the appropriate organisations to also support it and work with them to achieve it.

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*Heidi, The  
Little Match  
Girl, Hope and  
Determination*





## ***Heidi, The Little Match Girl, Hope and Determination***

BY MARGIE NOLAN

Margie Nolan is a mother, step grandmother and wife, who works full time in a leadership role in a child and family centre. A few years ago, she contemplated a PhD, but instead chose to make quilts that she could give to family and friends.

As a ten year old, the two significant books on my bookshelf were *Heidi* and *The Little Match Girl*.

The *Early Reader Series* – *Heidi* was a story about family relationships, friendships, compassion towards others, loss, the importance of comfort, tenderness, being happy and ultimately overcoming adversity. Throughout the book there were very strong messages about the importance of education and of being able to read.

As a young adult, I often reflected on the determination that wheelchair-bound Klara had shown to learn to walk. I truly felt that this book had been one of the influences on my choice as a young physiotherapist to work with very young children, often teaching them to walk.

When I was ten years old, I convinced the local newsagent to give me a job delivering newspapers with my older brother four nights a week. I bought a book with my first pay. It was *The Little Match Girl*, a Hans Christian Andersen story about a very young girl with no name. *The Little Match Girl* was poor, and her only resources were her matches which she used to keep herself warm as



she fell asleep forever. I read this book to myself every night for at least the following year.

Now as I move on through my career, I find myself working in an educational setting with very young children and their families. Among the families that I meet, there are a number who have intergenerational factors that impact on their life course. Living in poverty is probably the most significant factor.

So how do we help families where poverty has such an impact? Families living in poverty are deeply entrenched in the milieu of survival and trying to make sense of one's own life, which often makes communicating to one's children much more difficult.

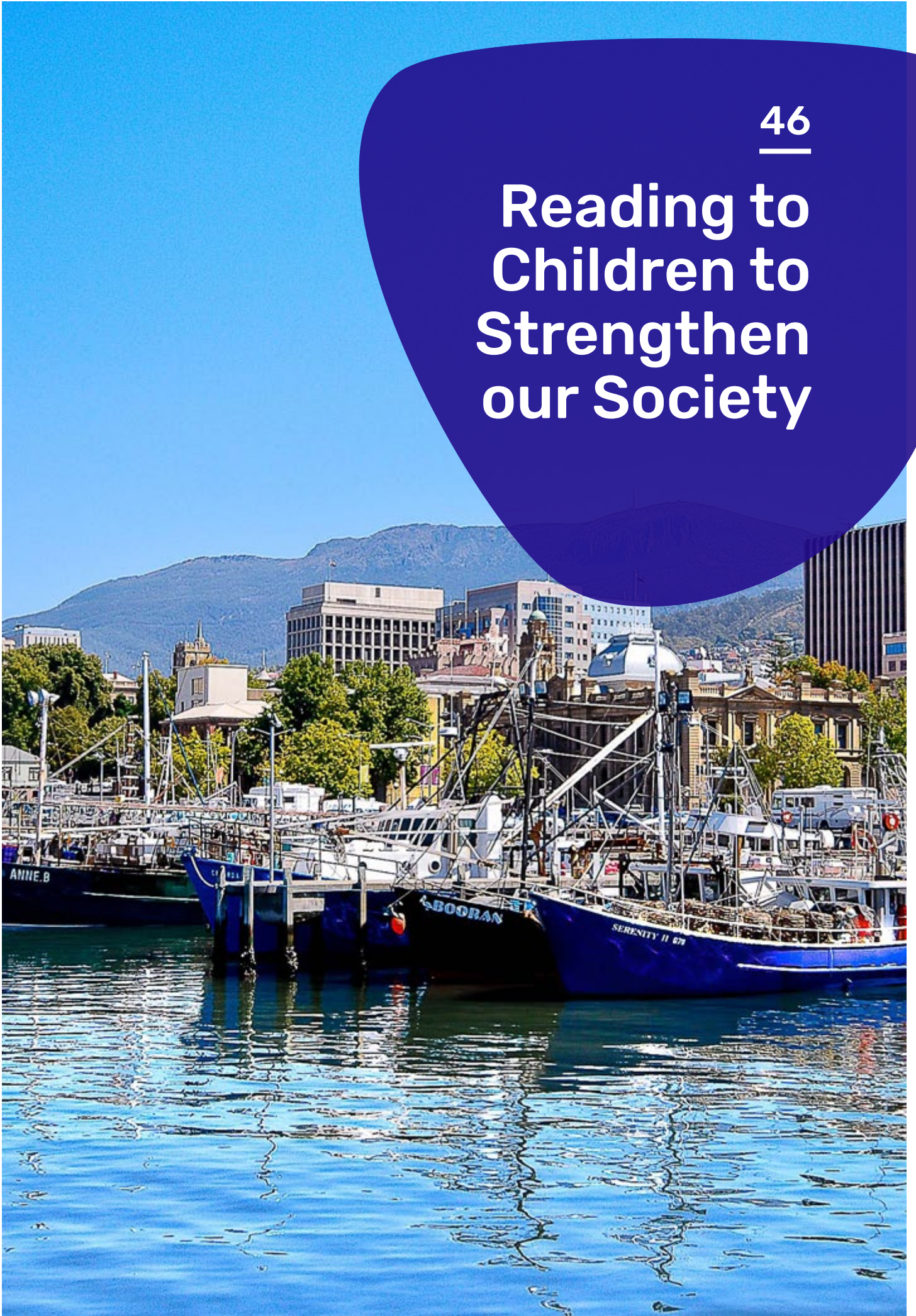
The evidence is clear that the first 1000 days, including pregnancy, is so critical to a child's life outcomes. Nurturing our babies throughout pregnancy and through the early years is very complex and involves good support and nutrition, calmness and moderation. We know that for babies, and perhaps even for the unborn baby, deep listening to their many languages is essential. From the day that a child is born, seeing, hearing, listening, talking, understanding, teaching, rhythm and making sense of a child's world are essential in building secure attachments, trust, positive relationships and in unlocking language. These are essentially shared experiences and all-important stepping stones towards literacy.

It is critical that we are mindful of the importance of the very early years and of how we can improve our supports to families of children particularly where disadvantage from poverty and other factors so heavily impacts on their lives. We need to consider different and creative ways of teaching children literacy, and of working with families in ways that are meaningful to them and mindful of their circumstances.

My two significant books were the only two books on my treasured bookshelf. I was an optimistic child, and remember at the age of six telling my brother that I would go to university one day. Hope and determination clearly played their part as I stumbled my way through many embarrassing moments in life that on reflection were indicative of my lack of reading throughout my childhood. Thankfully all of these experiences have led me to where I am now!



# Reading to Children to Strengthen our Society







## Reading to Children to Strengthen our Society

BY MARK MORRISSEY

Over the course of his career Mark Morrissey has been a strong advocate for the importance of early intervention and investing in the early years in a child's life. He remains a passionate advocate for children's rights and the need to better support vulnerable children and young people. He has held various senior leadership positions that focused on children and young people.

**T**he simple act of interacting and communicating with a child by reading them a story is a fundamentally important contribution to their healthy development and future literacy skills.

Reading to a child ticks so many critical developmental boxes. The simple act of picking up a book is a powerful strategy that costs very little but provides a significant return on investment. The benefits include strengthening parental and social attachment, fostering and sparking children's imagination and helping to nurture their natural curiosity of a world beyond their existing experiences and knowledge. Reading fosters their understanding of the richness and depth of other places, worlds and realities. Reading and reflection strengthens a child's development of empathy and compassion for others.

Reading a storybook is an invaluable contribution all adults of any age can make to a child's development. It sows and nurtures the crucial seeds of literacy, leading to successful participation in education and career opportunities, which are essential in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We read to our children for all sorts of reasons. Storybooks can calm anxious children down; help put them off to sleep; dazzle their minds; tease their tongues with twisting sounds; and show them new people, animals and places from all over the world.

If we have unused books, we can take steps to ensure they go somewhere they will be read: in particular to children and families who may be in poverty or are disadvantaged. In repurposing our books, we are playing our part in improving literacy outcomes for families who cannot afford them.

Reflecting back on my own childhood, a particular memory I clearly recall is of books being available and always present in the family home. My family had little in material possessions, but books were freely available. I often witnessed my mother with her head buried in a book. The role modelling that occurs when a child routinely witnesses a parent reading is invaluable. For me it was formative.

Once my appetite for reading was whetted, I then went on to acquire my first library card and delved into the wide and fascinating world of literature and magazines held on the shelves of these silent repositories. It was the stories and photographs in *National Geographic* magazine or maybe Mr Toad's travel adventures in *The Wind in the Willows* that sparked my passion for travel and foreign places. I grew to greatly enjoy and value books and reading, which then became the catalyst for my educational pathway as a young adult.

If we as a society are to adequately address the challenges of low literacy levels here in Tasmania, it is important that skilful and compassionate engagement with families affected by poor literacy is continued and strengthened. Literacy is the gateway to greater educational opportunity and life opportunities.

We read to our children for all sorts of reasons. Storybooks can calm anxious children down; help put them off to sleep; dazzle their minds; tease their tongues with twisting sounds; and show them new people, animals and places from all over the world.



We read to our children to teach them something about the world. To try out new words, read about different religions, listen to tales of friendships that bridge boundaries and cultures.

I wonder if we need to take more seriously the books we read to our children. To think about their values, start paying attention to how some stories portray men and women, cultures and nations. It is in these often-simple childhood tales and stories that our children's values are established and their life-long beliefs are formed.

Perhaps another of the most pressing reasons we read to our children is to teach them how to be good people.

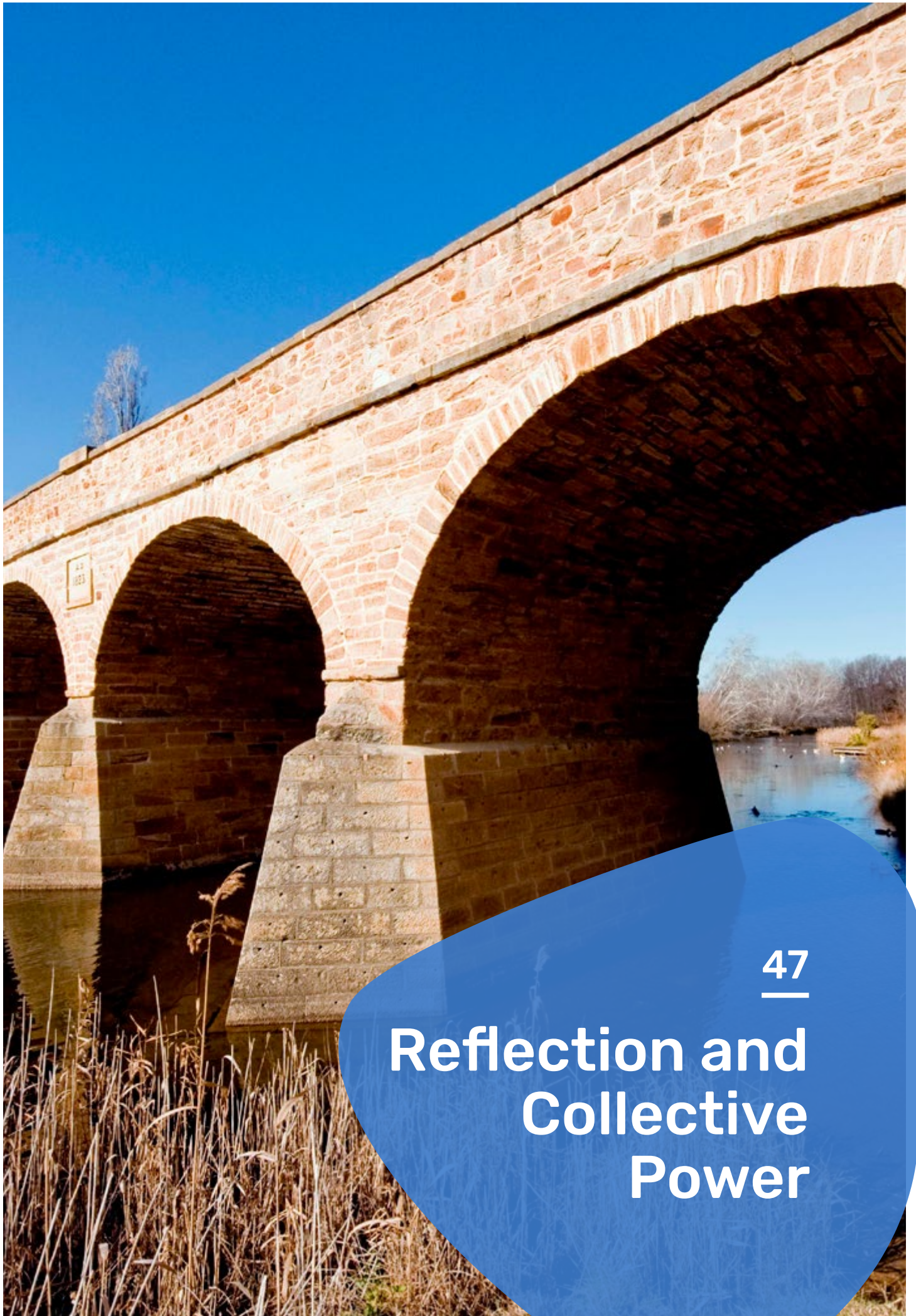
There are examples of world leaders today who claim never to have read a book. I cannot but wonder how much better a person they could have been today if their experience of literature and children's storybooks, and the values therein, had been different, and to ask how much better the world would be if, during their childhood, they had been instilled with a greater sense of empathy, compassion and awareness of the great diversity and richness within all humanity.

This simple interaction between a parent or carer will help to establish the fundamentally important roots of empathy, compassion and aspiration to achieve. But some children do not have a parent or significant other who can read to and nurture them. This situation can have profound effects on their development.

Reading to kids is a great investment. We can all play our part. There are countless wonderfully written and illustrated books available that are suited to children and young people of all ages. Children's literacy and educational trajectory will be strengthened through each of us taking time to read to a child, who will benefit by the gift of that time.

In closing, when was the last time you read to a child or purchased them a book?

Maybe this can be something each of us chooses to do in the near future. And let's not forget, many children's books can be great fun to read, especially for us adults.



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# Reflection and Collective Power





# Reflection and Collective Power

BY MARY DWYER

Mary Dwyer is CEO and Founding Director of Impact Solutions International. She is a global Tasmanian who works on wicked problems across the world. Her expertise is working on large scale change including deep one-on-one work with leaders, especially those who are leading their countries out of violent conflict. When she is lucky enough she applies her skills and knowledge to tricky problems that are closer to her beloved island home of Tasmania.

**W**e have a ‘wicked’ literacy issue on this beautiful island of ours, the tangled roots of which are generational. No one person or one group is to blame. And none of us are unaffected.

The effects stretch across sector boundaries, including health, our justice system, restoration, education, employment, not-for-profits and our financial and governance systems to name a few.

The outcome is the same – an individual’s, and therefore our community’s, wellbeing and our safety are diminished by this dis-ease.

When I do not know where to begin I track back down the lines and loops of the interconnected effects and sit quietly with the question – what is required to break this wicked problem open? But first *I* needed to open ... so I spent an hour today in silent reflection.

## Only then we will be able to break open the code.

I imagined I was born into a family that had, for generations, never known what it was like to work. I imagined a family that struggled every day to make ends meet. I imagined I was part of a family that hated Centrelink and understood the reason why for the first time; every time I went there I could not read the forms and I felt humiliated despite the skilled care.

In my hour of reflection, I felt the rise of an anger that was defence against a community judgment that was often silent, yet deafening in its roar – at least inside my head. Everywhere I turned I couldn't read the messages that provided guidance about what I should or shouldn't do. I realised I could not even read a menu, so I ordered the same food over and over again.

In my hour of reflection, I understood that to manage my isolation, my exclusion, to manage my shame, to manage my separation, I began to numb and blame others for my pain. At times violence was my release as well as my plea.

I felt the heartache of a mother and father, with a life circumstance very different to my own reality, and I realised how deeply they love their children too.

I realised, in this one hour of reflection, that my own privilege numbed me to the difficulties and challenges that people face even when they want to break out of the cycle that they are in. I felt how much personal courage it must take to break away from my own mob, even if I really wanted my life to be different.

For only an hour I sat with what it must be like to want to change a life which was not of my choosing but given to me by the circumstances of my birth, and I understood – just a little more deeply – the wicked problem we have to solve and what it might require of us.

My reflection time gave me some insight beyond my own judgment and I came to understand that the issue is systemic so the answer must be too. A key often lies in the heart of the problem and it was there I turned to next.



If literacy is gained by learning to understand code and the learning happens through the building of psychological safety created through warm and trusting relationships, then this is exactly what we need to do – we need to come together warming to each other and our different views, open and willing to trust. Only then we will be able to break open the code.

This is the spirit of true cooperation our own needs, our own views put aside so that collectively we can create something new. This can only happen when we too feel safe. Any wicked problem can only be solved on the level of the collective – our structures are beyond a heroic individual although one, in Rosalie, has paved a way.

And finally, in my hour of quiet reflection, I realised how important it was for me to be educated by those who are imprisoned by the circumstances of which we speak; they know the code of illiteracy better than us all. I need to also understand the good things that are already being done and say thank you to the teachers and educators, counsellors, public servants, speech pathologists, police men and women, and everyone else who work at the coal face of the effects of this problem every day. Their wisdom is invaluable in understanding the code. Their wisdom is informed by the heart of their lived experience.

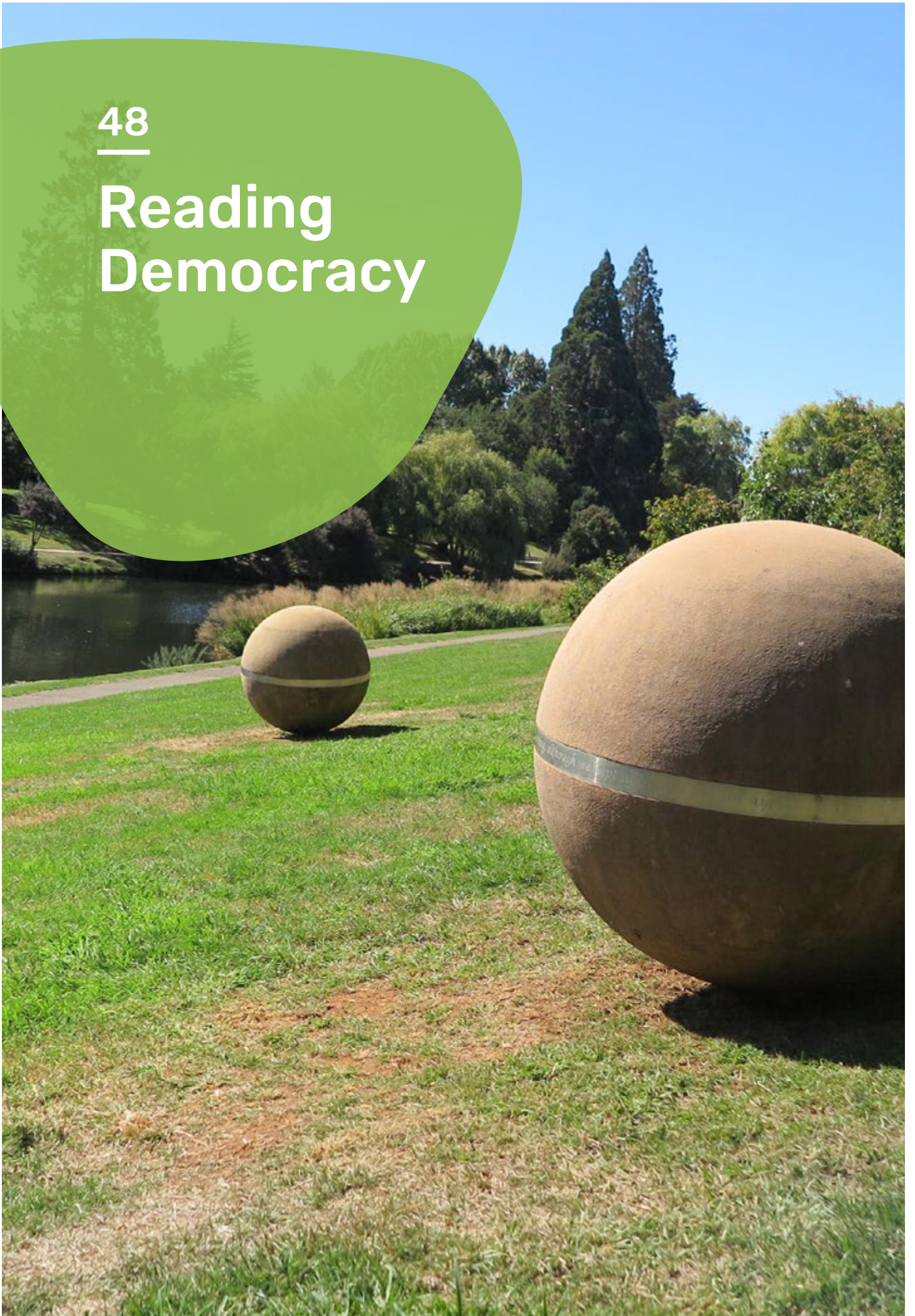
Decades of working across countries on big issues has eroded my certainty that I have the solution but has deepened my conviction that by working as a collective we can find a way forward.

It may take a generation or two but I can imagine celebrating a different literacy statistic in our island home because in 2018 we came together to communicate – it is after all the Heart of Literacy.

*Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world*  
Nelson Mandela

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# Reading Democracy





# Reading Democracy

BY MATTHEW LAMB

Matthew Lamb is the founding editor of *Review of Australian Fiction* and former editor of *Island* magazine. He is currently writing a biography of Frank Moorhouse.

One of the limitations with the way the question of low literacy is raised in our society is that it is often done so in a technocratic, rather than a democratic, manner. The difference is that a technocratic approach sees society as a series of problems to be solved, while a democratic approach sees society as a number of individuals we must live with.

One of the fundamental ways we live with other individuals is through a process of communication. The degree to which we communicate is the degree to which we can say that we are living in a democracy. Literacy is integral to this process; it increases our capacity to act as citizens.

The problem is not that some individuals can't read or write; the situation is that our society doesn't value reading and writing as a means of communication, but treats it rather as a tool to control, to dominate, to gain advantage, to retreat, or, what is more commonplace, to simply ignore, other people.

But when members of our community are low in literacy their capacity to act as citizens is diminished. And, as a democracy is predicated upon the equality of all its citizens, then this also diminishes our democracy. And that, in one way or another, diminishes everybody.

Perhaps this is why even the more literate among us tend to react to the question of low literacy in a technocratic manner.

The situation we have created is this. According to a national survey in 2011/2012, 48.8% of Tasmanians, aged 15 – 75 were below the minimum level of literacy required to fully function in a modern society. The results of that survey were measured along a 0 to 5 point scale, with level 3 being the minimum level, below which (levels 0–2) people are said to be low in literacy.

Although this survey was completed six years ago, it is still the best benchmark we currently have. It comes off the back of two previous national surveys, in 1996 and 2006, which yielded consistently similar results. So this is a long-term, relatively stable situation that we have created.

Such surveys, statistics and measurements are important. We can't do without them. We can use such figures as a way to put the world into perspective. It would be wrong, however, to confuse these figures with the world, as if they were identical, as if the world were static or fixed and, in so doing, to lose our perspective.

But this is exactly what was done when these 2011/2012 results first came out. The national media response was to compare the figures across all states, and to argue that Tasmania had the worst levels of literacy in Australia. Various experts and associations in Tasmania at the time replied to this charge. They chipped away at the statistics, parsed the results, and argued that the levels 0 – 2 are on a sliding scale, so it didn't necessarily mean that these people couldn't read or write at all, it just meant that people within these cohorts have varying degrees of being able to read and write. Low literacy therefore became simply a problem to be managed. One Tasmanian newspaper even ran an article under the header: '49% literacy "not as bad as it looks"' (July 11 2012).

Already, following the previous survey in 2006, the Tasmanian Government had put a policy in action with the aim of shifting the statistical needle by 10 percentage points in 10 years. And, because the survey covered ages 15 – 75, they targeted adult literacy. The goal posts have since shifted, however, to now want to achieve a nearly 12 percentage point shift among adult literacy by the year 2025. The aim is to have 40% of the Tasmanian adult population below the minimum level of literacy required to fully function in a modern society.

At least then we could say we had the 'best' literacy rates in Australia.

But that would not be as good as it looks.



... our society doesn't value reading and writing as a means of communication, but treats it rather as a tool to control, to dominate, to gain advantage, to retreat, or, what is more commonplace, to simply ignore, other people.

Let's consider these figures more closely, through a democratic lens, the better to see past them, at the ever-shifting reality on the other side. The national average for levels 0 – 2 from that last survey was 44.2%, which suggests that Tasmania was, and is, being used to avoid dealing with what is a national crisis in literacy. Queensland, for example, had the relatively 'best' levels of literacy, with 42.7% of its population existing below the minimum level required to fully function in a modern society; that is, without the required capacity to be citizens in a democracy.

So what really is the difference between 'best' and 'worst' in this situation? The difference is between a technocratic approach that trades in percentages, and a democratic approach that deals with people. Now look again. In 2012, Queensland had 1,429,900 people below the minimum level of literacy, while Tasmania had only 181,500 people in the same situation. In reality, Tasmania has the fewest number of people with low literacy in Australia. But this also means that we have less reason to excuse ourselves from the responsibility of addressing this reality comprehensively.

But such a perspective shouldn't make us too complacent.

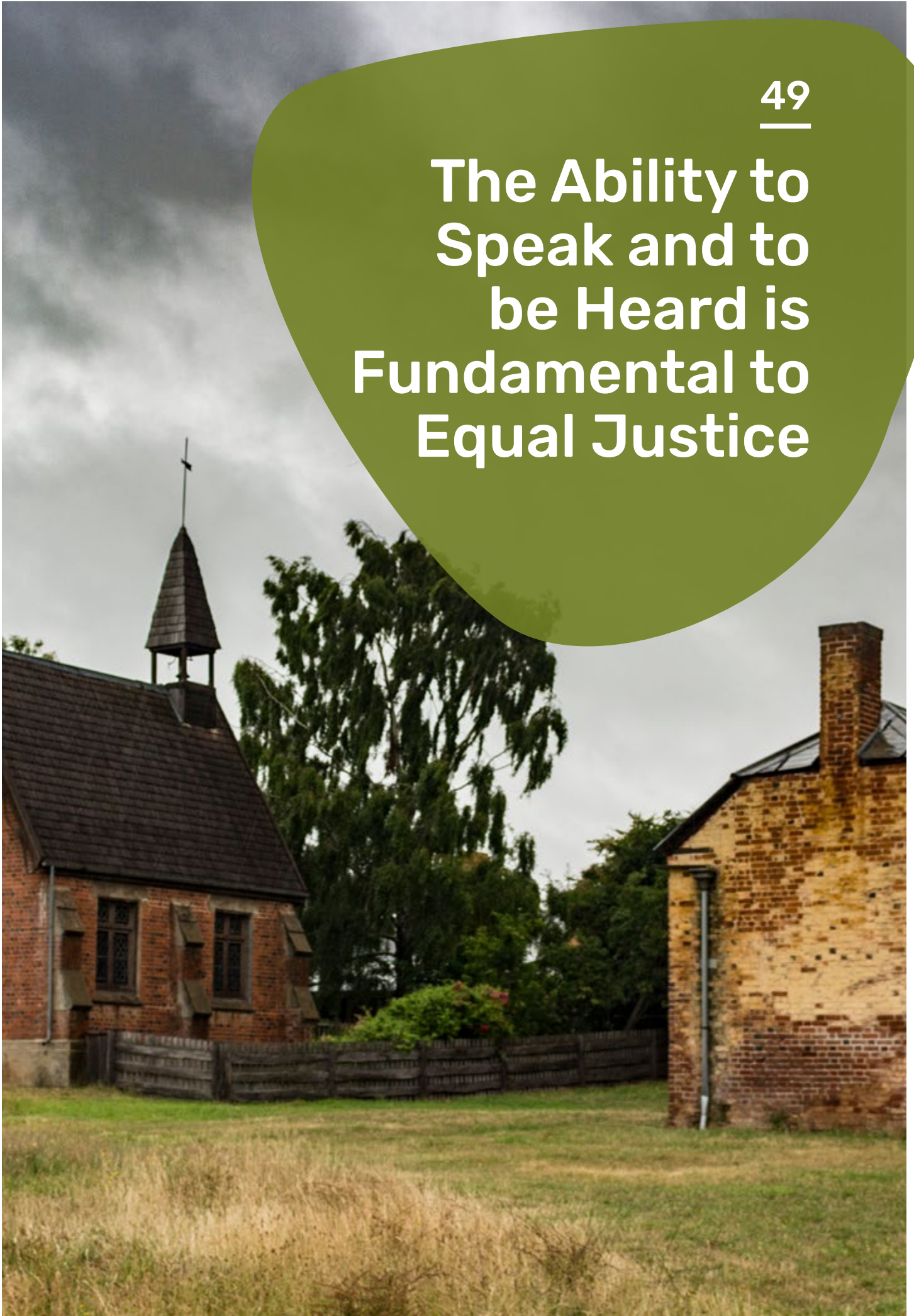
At first sweep, it looks like shifting 12 percentage points before 2025 would require converting close to 1500 individual adults each and every year to a level of autonomous, functional literacy. But that would only be true if no new functionally illiterate adults were being created during that same period. And Tasmanians are giving birth to around 5800 babies each year. According to the relatively stable levels of low literacy since the first survey in 1996, this suggests that around 2800 of those newborns, each and every year, are fated to be potential clients for our adult literacy services. And if those services – with good people working hard, but already stretched to the limit – are even

managing to convert close to that figure, then we are, at best, maintaining the status quo. At worst, we are going backwards. It is like bailing floodwater with a thimble.

And that would only be true if those individuals who have successfully worked through an adult literacy program keep up their reading and writing, which is an ongoing, lifelong commitment, and don't backslide.

Of course, it would seem that what is required is that our existing strategies need to be complemented by a series of comprehensive strategies for all Tasmanian babies and infants below school age, then throughout formal education, as well as ongoing, lifelong support structures for adult reading and writing. And that requires a society that values reading and writing as a means of communication, of building community. It requires citizens. And, as a democracy is predicated upon the equality of all its citizens, then such a comprehensive set of policies and public action would also enhance our democracy.

The Ability to  
Speak and to  
be Heard is  
Fundamental to  
Equal Justice





## The Ability to Speak and to be Heard is Fundamental to Equal Justice

BY MICHAEL DALY

Michael Daly is the Deputy Chief Magistrate of the Tasmanian Magistrates Court and has served on that court since 2007. He has an interest in legal processes which promote better outcomes for the justice system, participants and the law.

Judicial officers take an oath to ‘do equal right and justice to all persons’ to the best of their judgment and ability according to law. But in cases where people have communication difficulties, it is sometimes important to treat them differently, so as to ensure their treatment before the law is indeed equal. In these cases, the court accommodates a person’s reduced abilities to understand and communicate.

Some people who appear in Tasmanian courts experience communication difficulties which might stand in the way of them receiving equal justice. Research suggests that about 17 – 18% of Australians aged 15 – 74 have poor spoken English and poor reading skills (it is higher, of course, for those with English as a second language). People with these difficulties often suffer other disabilities, too, including intellectual and cognitive disabilities. Research also suggests that people experiencing these difficulties are over-represented in the criminal justice system.

Appearing in court is an occasion when it is important to be able to understand what is happening and to get your point across. If your oral or written language skills are not good enough to do that, serious consequences might follow.



Judicial officers also understand that people will perceive court processes as fair if they are given the opportunity both to speak and to be heard. The extent to which a person is able to speak and to be heard prior to a judge making a decision can be decisive in whether they comply with decisions of the courts and with the law more generally.

For those with communication difficulties, court processes can be unclear or appear intimidating. What happens in court can impact a person's finances, their relationships and their liberty. Those who are at high risk of going to prison may have few skills with which to communicate effectively, when it can be critical that they do so.

Rehabilitation options offered by the court's sentences provide some offenders with an opportunity to learn to communicate more effectively, to write and to read in order to address this issue, which can improve their lives significantly. Through better communication skills, people become better at dealing with their families, their neighbours and the authorities without confrontation. Through improved literacy, the stressful and distressing aspects of their lives might be navigated without the conflict born of frustration which sometimes leads to involvement with police and courts. Under the court's sentencing orders, and through the LINC and programs such as Chatter Matters, people are given the opportunity to transform their lives.

Judicial officers endeavour always to act in a way that promotes respect for the law. That involves ensuring that those who appear before the court have the opportunity to understand what is happening and to say what they need to say. When researchers ask why people obey the law, they generally agree that people will do so if they perceive that they are treated fairly, with dignity and respect. The research shows that if people experience the justice system in this way, they will see it as a legitimate authority and they will obey the law and accept more readily what they are told by those in authority. The research also demonstrates that people will be satisfied with a judge's ruling – even if it is

against them – provided that they felt that they were treated fairly and with dignity and respect. The perception of fairness in court proceedings begins with how respectfully judges speak to people in court.

Judicial officers also understand that people will perceive court processes as fair if they are given the opportunity both to speak and to be heard. The extent to which a person is able to speak and to be heard prior to a judge making a decision can be decisive in whether they comply with decisions of the courts and with the law more generally.

It can be understood, then, that the ability to speak and the opportunity to be heard are fundamental to fair and equal treatment before the law. Indeed, a better system of justice depends on court proceedings successfully accommodating these things. Courts realise that measures promoting fair procedures are especially important in the case of those with communication difficulties.

A photograph of a waterfall in a dense, lush green forest. The water is captured with a long exposure, creating a soft, blurred effect as it flows over a series of rocks. The surrounding vegetation is thick with various types of ferns and trees, creating a vibrant green environment. The lighting is natural, highlighting the textures of the water and the forest floor.

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## Communication for Justice





# Communication for Justice

BY MICHAEL HILL

Michael Hill retired in 2015 after 30 years on the Magistrates Court Bench in Tasmania, the last 6 as Chief Magistrate. He was instrumental in the introduction of problem solving courts in Tasmania and still speaks in the community on those approaches.

**T**he purpose of the *Communicating: The Heart of Literacy* symposium is ‘to continue to build and enact the collaboration and courage required to positively move Tasmania’s “wicked” literacy problem’.

From my experience of over 40 years in the criminal justice system including 30 years sitting in courts around Tasmania I thought I would pass on some observations which might assist in the debate over what steps can be taken to address what I see is a most vital issue. In my experience literacy issues do not simply stop at an inability to read or write but flow on to an inability to communicate even in general terms.

Persons who appear in courts in this state and I am sure elsewhere in the world are generally stressed and nervous. They are not there by choice and many of course are there for the first time and they have little knowledge of the legal system, the words used in it, and the rituals that are observed. They are keenly aware they cannot read or write but for various reasons often do not tell anyone.

They are handed pieces of paper to read which are meant to be helpful and to assist them in the process. They cannot of course read them and their



... if they cannot communicate their situation to the court there is a real risk of injustice ...

subsequent failure to do what the contents of the document asks them to may often be seen as a contemptuous attitude to the court process and they are often treated as uncooperative. They develop a mistrust of the system.

In a recent Tasmanian Law Reform Commission Report entitled *Facilitating Equal Access to Justice: An Intermediary / Communication Assistant Scheme for Tasmania?* is the following statement:

*Failure to accommodate people with communication needs adequately in the criminal justice system has serious ramifications for case outcomes, and, importantly, for justice itself. It may mean that crimes they report are not prosecuted or that they are exposed to unjust conviction for crimes they are alleged to have committed.*

And it is observed:

*There is currently no statutory or practice framework covering the provision of communication/intermediary services to assist the legal profession when interacting with people with communication needs.*

So, if those observations are correct, and I suspect they are, we have a criminal justice system ill-equipped from the very start to assist people who have problems with communication often based on their poor (or non-existent) literacy skills.

Of course, as we all know for a number of reasons, particularly in the Magistrates Court, many people appear without the benefit of legal assistance. It is often not known to the sitting magistrate that a person may have literacy difficulties until it becomes obvious, perhaps because of the person's apparent problems in reading, say, a suggested list of their criminal history, that the magistrate may be put on alert. Magistrates as with lawyers have no special training to deal with persons who have such issues save to attempt to ensure that they understand the process and, if there is a risk they cannot, to try to assist them or obtain expert services to do so. In the hustle and bustle of busy courtrooms sometimes this does not occur.

All citizens have a right to a fair hearing and to be treated fairly and justly and if they cannot communicate their situation to the court there is a real risk of injustice if the court proceeds without them being able to participate in a meaningful way.

Part of communication of course is that the Court is going to listen to you and take note of what you say and then deal with your case appropriately.

Courts have in recent years taken a different course in dealing with certain offenders and new courts have emerged commonly called “problem solving” Courts.

The problem-solving court magistrate of course deals more directly with persons before the court even if they have a lawyer. It was noted in a recent article entitled “The New Judicial Role” by Sharon Roach Anleu and Kathy Mack that:

“An active judicial officer is central to the implementation of more engaged judging. Judicial officers using new approaches will be more interested in the welfare of litigants, actively interact with and listen to participants, engage in direct dialogue and be less formal and impersonal than their more traditional counterparts.”

The authors make the following important observation:

“This focus on the nature and quality of the interaction between judicial officers and the individuals appearing before them, emphasises the significance of communication, especially listening, empathy and direct personal engagement.”

It can be seen, I think, that the communication issue is well recognised in the court system but addressing it in a really meaningful way has taken some time to gain real momentum.

This approach by Magistrates will of course help and involve people in the process but these courts are only a small part of the courts business. The risk of injustice will unfortunately continue, and one hopes the discussions that take place at the symposium and subsequently will open some avenues for positive developments to address this problem.



A photograph of a snowy forest path. The path is covered in snow and leads through a dense forest of tall, thin trees. A person is visible in the distance on the path. The scene is bright and sunny, with snow reflecting the light. The trees have light-colored bark and some green foliage. A large, semi-transparent blue shape is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing the page number and title.

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# Logic and Literacy





## Logic and Literacy

BY MICHAEL ROWAN

Michael Rowan is a philosopher with particular interests in science, education, and how people can resolve their disagreements by learning from each other.

**W**hen I was growing up in the 1950s, cars still had carburettors and distributors to supply fuel, air and the spark to make the engine fire. Car tyres had tubes, and country roads were mostly not paved. All of which led to breakdowns being a regular feature of motoring.

When cars were stuck on the side of the road, some people drove by, others stopped to help. My dad always stopped to help, perhaps because he was a lay preacher, perhaps because he ran a service station. We often seemed to stop on the way to a morning church service in the country. Mum was not impressed that Dad would always use his well-ironed white handkerchief to dry a soggy distributor.

Farmers were also reliable ‘stoppers’ rather than ‘passers’ when a stranded motorist needed assistance. Mostly stalwarts of the very conservative Country Party, as it then was, they stopped just like the wharfies and other socialist sympathisers, the kinds of people who were the backbone of Meals on Wheels and other ‘do-gooder’ working-class organisations.

I pondered this a lot when as a young uni student I would return home to heated arguments about the war in Vietnam, conscription, the destruction of the environment by unrestrained capitalism and so on. People who in really important ways behaved the same when it came to helping their fellow human beings face to face had widely differing views on what is in the best interests



Maintaining open and respectful communication with those that disagree with us is a crucial part of maintaining our own rationality.

of their fellow human beings in general. They would think they had little in common. But they shared the most important of human attributes – a genuine concern for others.

I tried hard to remember this as I got older. We tend to slip too easily into thinking that people who do not share our views, our politics, are bad people in some way. Indeed it is hard not to think like that as we move through life and find our circle of work colleagues and friends narrowing to people ‘of like mind’.

I was helped by learning from philosophy that we humans are not, as we like to imagine ourselves to be, observant and rational beings – *homo sapiens*, the wise animal. We would be better described as (excuse the made-up Latin) *homo self-deceptivus*, the self-deceiving animal. We tend to engage our rational faculties to defend a view after we have formed it, rather than to come to our views in the first place. In forming our views, self-interest, emotion, group think and personality trump logic and evidence. We turn to logic and evidence, to the extent that we ever do, when our views are challenged, not when we are coming to a position on some matter.

Philosophers have understood this from the time of Socrates. He had especially good advice on how we can live less like *homo self-deceptivus* and more like *homo sapiens*. Don’t wait for others to challenge your beliefs, make it habit yourself. Whenever we have a strongly held view about something, say – to take a couple of local and topical examples, the expansion of the salmon industry or the reform of senior secondary education – always ask yourself ‘What evidence would change my mind about this?’ If we cannot say what would change our minds, how will we recognize the evidence which should change our minds when we encounter it?

The deep lesson of philosophy is that being rational – guiding our actions by the search for truth and the application of logic – is work. It is hard work. It does not come naturally to us humans. Rationality is a learned practice, one we need to continue to work at. And that work is done in dialogue, with ourselves and more powerfully with others. Maintaining open and respectful communication with those who disagree with us is a crucial part of maintaining our own rationality.

In dialogue we can unpick our differences. Where do we disagree in our values? Where do we disagree on what evidence is relevant to the issue that divides us? How do we disagree about what conclusion some evidence supports? Where do we disagree on what else we need to know to firm up – or change – our views?

It is a strange thing that we think it reasonable that it should take a year or so and many skilled people to build us a house, yet we build our views of the world often without seeking the assistance of others and take little time over it. How much richer our lives would be, and how much more likely we would be to avoid false belief, if we took as much trouble to build our mental world as we do our physical world. That is why, for all of us and at all stages of our lives, of all the things we can do with our time, education is the most rewarding. And the means of true education is always dialogue.



*Something to think about: If you are opposed to the expansion of, say, Tasmania's salmon industry, what evidence would change your mind; while if you are in favour, what evidence would persuade you to become an opponent? Have you looked for any such evidence, and if not, where might you go to find it?*

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# A Lesson from Greek

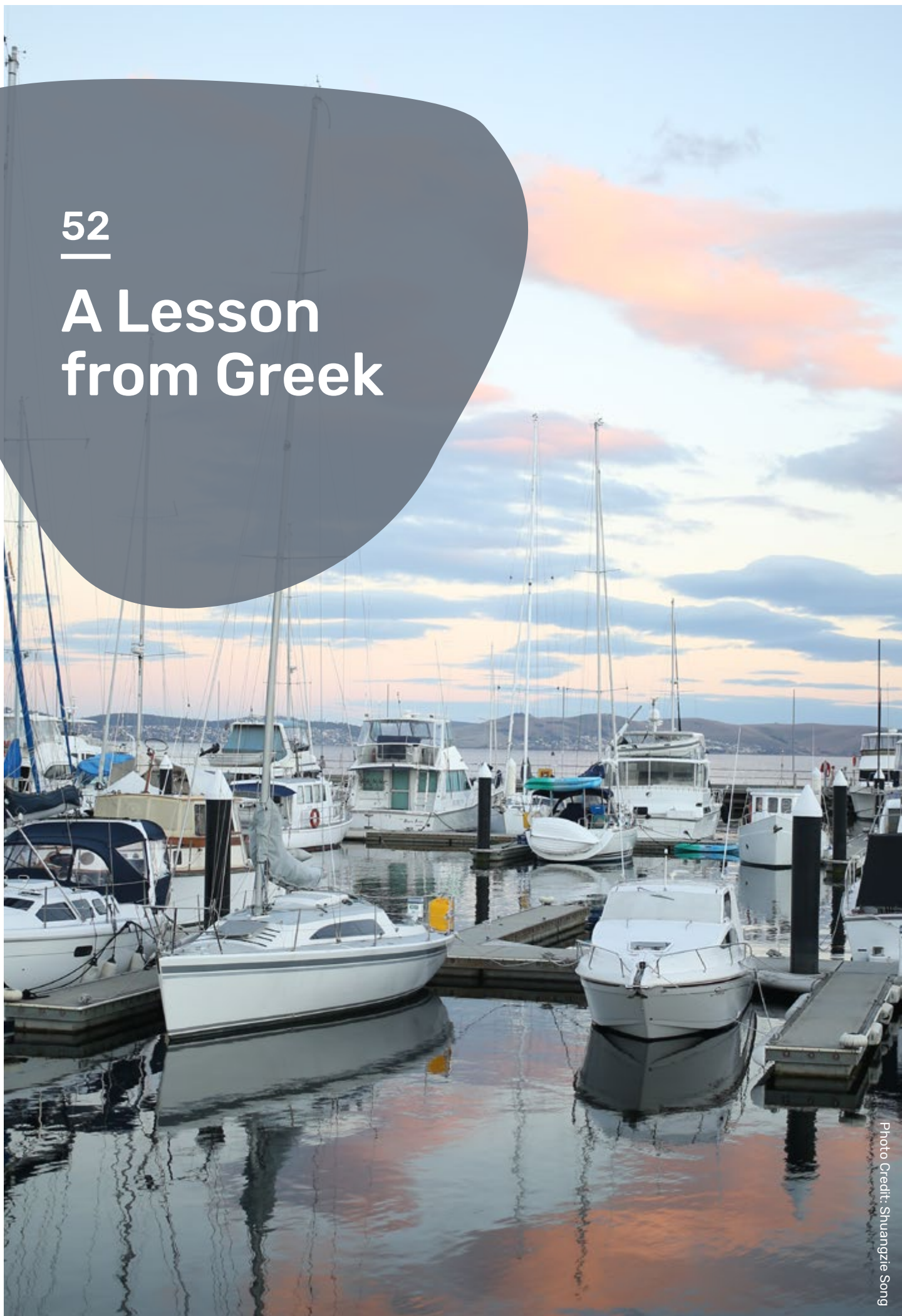


Photo Credit: Shuangzie Song



## A Lesson from Greek

BY REVEREND PROFESSOR MICHAEL TATE AO

Reverend Professor Michael Tate AO graduated in law from the University of Tasmania and in Theology from Oxford University. He was a Senator for Tasmania and Federal Minister for Justice. After serving as Ambassador to The Hague and The Holy See, he returned to Australia and was ordained in the Roman Catholic Church in May 2000.

I recall arriving at Oxford in 1968 to study further law, having completed my law degree at the University of Tasmania. As one might guess, I was highly literate in the intricacies of the English language. I thoroughly enjoyed reading a judgment which might have a sentence of 15 or so lines with lots of clauses and commas, but which was perfectly comprehensible.

I decided to switch from the study of law to the, for me, completely new field of theology. Imagine my dismay when I discovered that the Gospels and the letters of St Paul were written in Greek. I know you are waiting for the next obvious: 'It was all Greek to me'. It was all squiggles on a page. I could have been in an ancient tomb of the pharaohs trying to decipher the hieroglyphics.

Just like a person illiterate in English, I was faced with marks on a page which conveyed no meaning. This was a totally new experience for me, both embarrassing and humiliating, and in those distressing months in late 1968 I felt great sympathy for those who can't read or write English.



**'It was all Greek to me'. It was all squiggles on a page. I could have been in an ancient tomb of the pharaohs trying to decipher the hieroglyphics.**

Of course, other students taking up the theology course had been studying Greek at an upper-class English school since an early age. So, my tutor informed me (without much sympathy for the colonial boy) that I would have to teach myself. He loaned me a book on Greek grammar and that was that.

He did give me one piece of advice: 'Start with St John's gospel, as the vocabulary, if not the thought, was reasonably straightforward.' So I did, and found to my astonishment, so relevant to my situation, that the opening words are usually translated in English as: 'In the beginning was the Word'.

How true! I think it was Stephen Fry who said something like: 'Human beings are language animals'. In the course of evolution, he said, the larynx developed in such a way as to take us beyond grunts or simple calls. And as human beings began to inhabit the whole world, Earth could be properly described as 'Planet Word'. Beyond speaking, I think we enhance what it is to be human the more we are at ease reading or writing words which convey meaning for ourselves or to others.

I eventually mastered enough Greek to scrape through that part of the examinations. But, to use an Australian expression, 'It was bloody hard work!', and very frustrating up to that Eureka moment when the squiggles on the page began to mean something. But what a moment!

To all my fellow Tasmanians who may tackle a literacy course, I wish you all the best. Press on through the embarrassment and frustration. I can assure you that the moment will come, and when it does you will feel a joy and pride almost impossible to put into words!



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## How Schools Fail Vulnerable Students



## How Schools Fail Vulnerable Students

BY MIKE FROST

Mike Frost is one of the ‘true believers’ in the positive impact vocational education and training (VET) can have on young people still at school. He is Director of Mike Frost & Associates, an education and training consultancy specialising in school-to-work transition and VET for school students.

I was responsible for teaching a challenging group of Year 10 students at a small, disadvantaged Hobart high school located in a Housing Commission area. The school fitted the ‘school-as-prison’ model – doors were locked to keep students out, classrooms were largely devoid of anything decorative, the notion of planting trees and gardens had long been abandoned because of theft.

The students were segregated mainly on the basis of their disruptive capacity. They came from a diverse array of homes and backgrounds, some at age 15 were already living independently, others lived with grandparents, other relations, even friends often on what amounted to a couch-surfing basis. Their experience of school through most of their short lives was of failure. While most had some semblance of literacy and numeracy ability, skills were largely absent. Aggression and violence were their major strategies for dealing with frustration. They fundamentally hated school although not their teachers (with a few exceptions).

Conventional classroom teaching and management was challenging – attention spans were short, interactions were often disruptive and any notion

**Sadly, this alternative approach to working with at-risk young people turned out to be unsustainable because it challenged the 'rules' by which schools conventionally operate.**

of placing value on learning was absent. So I took them away from school wherever I could. This involved activities like re-creating life for a 15-year-old in colonial Hobart through visiting the museum, St David's Cathedral, Salamanca Place and Hunter Street, to which they responded positively. They talked about what it would have been like, wondered about school and work, where families would have lived. We used a visit by the band AC/DC as the basis of a numeracy lesson on how much the band would have earned. They were thoughtful and constructive – and showed evidence of creative and imaginative capacity.

I took them to a local employment services provider for a presentation and discussion on their options after Year 10. They listened politely for 45 minutes, asked sensible and practical questions, and were impeccably behaved when we went to a nearby pizza place for lunch. I was surprised at how cooperative and supportive of each other they were, how they cared for their fellow students who were struggling to read the menu and know what to order. Back at school, however, they soon reverted to their aggressive, loud and assertive styles.

After a few weeks my relationship with the students began to change. One young woman stayed back after class one day to apologise for her behaviour – she took ADHD medication but still had trouble managing her temper and impetuosity and in fact was at a point where she risked being sent to Ashley if she mucked up again. Another begged to be allowed to come on our excursion even though he had been suspended!

One warm and humid mid-March Friday I took the straggling few who arrived for class down to a local beach. We sat and talked – they paddled and one or two went for a swim in their jocks. This was when I saw and heard firsthand what many of them were dealing with – the boy who got regularly booted out of his home when Mum's boyfriend returned from his 'fly-in fly-out' routine, the others who depended on the school's breakfast program because there was



regularly no food in the house, others who managed parental and adult abuse, one or two others who were primary carers for younger siblings. These were already young people living on the edge of adulthood with the consequences of poverty a primary distraction, with little adult support and even less for making a successful transition from school to working life. While school at least offered them some respite from the depredations of daily survival they saw little value in what was on offer.

Sadly, this alternative approach to working with at-risk young people turned out to be unsustainable because it challenged the ‘rules’ by which schools conventionally operate. Technically I was in breach of the Department of Education’s procedures – I hadn’t sought parental permission for an excursion in advance and hadn’t notified the local Department office – and this constituted an unacceptable level of risk for the school and the agency. In a much more litigious society, departments of education have become highly risk-averse taking away from teachers much of the professional judgment that once went without question.

Despite the fact that this one and a half hour session was playing a pivotal role in building a trusting teacher student relationship that would inevitably culminate in productive learning outcomes including building literacy and numeracy skills, it challenged too many of the conventional practices which applied across the board. My professional judgment was subsequently challenged. It became clear that the alternative approach of taking students off-campus wherever possible was seen as a threat to the norms governing school operations. Questions were indirectly raised about discipline, about trusting student behaviour and about wider student disaffection.

There are schools that do challenge convention and tradition. They are frequently led by imaginative leaders who are risk-takers, who put student learning at the very peak of their education planning and are prepared to try and test creative, alternative approaches. One of the saddest outcomes was that I was never afforded the opportunity to farewell the group of students with whom I had begun to develop a constructive and purposeful teaching and learning relationship. Once again, the adult world had let down at-risk and vulnerable young people.

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# Reading is a Miracle







# Reading is a Miracle

BY NEIL CAMERON

Neil Cameron has been in the forefront of cultural development since 1973 and has directed and produced over two hundred major projects. He has written four books and has a PhD in cultural studies.

Reading is a miracle. What you are doing right now is seriously wonderful.

How can we scan the single letters so quickly, making words, sentences and paragraphs, and, in an instant, sew them together into something that opens up the world? Our scientists are still puzzled by this act of magic. The ability of children to look at those quirky squiggles on a page and understand concepts, ideas and feelings sent to them by others through time and space still remains a mystery. Simple words transform into tales and stories steeped in wisdom and knowledge, bringing with them, past and future worlds far beyond their experience, but not their understanding. The child's awareness grows richer with every book they read. The words they read become part of them, absorbed in their very being, allowing them to expand their knowledge and understanding.

Reading allows the world to flow through us in all its complexity, bringing gifts rich in humanity and exploration. We learn, we are amazed, we travel in other people's lives for a while, we think, we puzzle, we disagree, we learn – we share the worlds of thoughts and feelings. What a privilege.

And most of us take it for granted, this gift.

Can you imagine a world where there are no books, no way of reading the information we need to fully function in our complex world? Knowledge would be denied, potential smothered, the world would be dimmed.

We would have no way of transferring knowledge from one to another. What would this really mean? The world's scientists could not hand on what they have learnt in medicine, astronomy, engineering, technology – and more. The list is almost endless. If our laws were not written down there would be no justice, we would have arbitrary regulations, people would suffer. Without agreements in writing there would be no contracts and we would fall victim to anarchy. News about the condition of the world would vanish and our accumulated knowledge with it. We would not understand our own history nor read about visions of a better future. There would be no way to accumulate the knowledge of the past.

And think of the loss of great writing. We would never hear the voices of understanding that have rung through the centuries. We would never thrill to the great stories or weep at the human condition; we would never laugh over foolishness or rise to the tales of heroes. These books, in their millions, are one of the greatest achievements of humankind. They are a towering achievement to our capacity to express what it is like to be alive. A glorious world of human expression would perish, each one of us would be denied a voice.

There are 129,864,880 books on earth right at this moment and we know there will be many more to come. It is impossible to gauge the number of other written communications most of us use in our day-to-day work. How many emails are sent a day, I wonder?

With this cultural and practical wealth at our disposal, can you imagine what it would be like not to read? To have no access to anything written on the planet: no newspapers, books, magazines, legal documents, instructions, information, signs, emails, letters and information. A person would be vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Their own potential would be crushed. Many political regimes have tried to do just this. To gain total control, they have denied or injured the right to learn to read. This is the ultimate tool of suppression.

Is it really true that 48% of Tasmanians cannot read properly? *If it is, we must change this situation now, with everything we've got.*





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# The Importance of Relationship in Literacy



## The Importance of Relationship in Literacy

BY NORM REED

Norm Reed is the pastor of a church that neighbours Risdon Prison. After receiving a Churchill Fellowship in 2014, Norm founded Onesimus Foundation to specifically support children and families of prisoners in Tasmania.

**M**y work in relation to literacy revolves around connecting children to their incarcerated parents through a program called the Homework Club. The Homework Club program provides an opportunity for incarcerated parents to engage with their children, by working through homework tasks and supporting them in their academic endeavours. These sessions are carried out both face-to-face from inside the prison visits centre, or by connecting with schools via video Skype sessions.

The school is responsible for setting the homework task, which is brought to the visit by the child or passed onto the parent for video sessions. In some circumstances the incarcerated parent has the opportunity to speak with teachers (via video in a parent/teacher interview) to discuss the child's needs.

The program has proven to be very promising, and so far, has elicited positive results. Having a parent in prison can have a significant impact on a child's educational prospects, and these children often experience learning difficulties and present as 'troubled' in school. School attendance is typically poor for the children of offenders, but these Homework Club sessions are considered by some children to be the highlight of their week.

This one-on-one time also allows for the child to be the main focus point for the duration of the session, and for them to experience the genuine interest and care of their parent.

In some instances, the parents themselves may struggle with literacy and it is very encouraging to see children take on the role of teacher, as they read extracts or explain maths problems to their mum or dad. Acting as 'teacher' for their incarcerated parent not only reinforces the material to the child, but also aids their confidence and self-esteem, and helps to develop strong communication skills.

The Homework Club also provides a number of unique opportunities for the incarcerated parent. It is reasonable to assume that many parents on the outside, particularly those in lower socioeconomic areas, would struggle to prioritise helping their child with homework. However, for a parent in prison, time is plentiful, and I am yet to meet a mum or dad who hasn't jumped at the opportunity to do homework with their child, regardless of their level of academic ability.

This program meets a number of the needs of children affected by parental incarceration. Due to distance or circumstances surrounding the family, some children are unable to visit their incarcerated parent. The Homework Club allows children to maintain a relationship with their incarcerated parent and participate in homework on a consistent weekly basis. Many of these children crave the affirmation of a parent, and the Homework Club provides an opportunity for children to showcase their schoolwork and engage with their parent in their daily challenges and successes. This one-on-one time also allows for the child to be the main focus point for the duration of the session, and for them to experience the genuine interest and care of their parent.

The success of this program is demonstrated in the story of a child living with her grandmother. This child was engaged in Homework Club with her dad over the course of 18 months. A few months after beginning the Homework Club, I received the following report from the grandmother. Please note that names have been changed for reasons of confidentiality.



*I would just like to let you know that Judy's grades have improved at school since she has had the opportunity to spend time studying with her father Peter. Judy's last two maths quizzes have her getting 40/40 when she used to struggle to pass these quizzes. Judy is also more positive in herself now, realising she can improve her grades if she works harder and puts in extra time with her homework. Judy is seeing her father in a positive light – with her now saying 'I'll ask dad when he rings' if she is struggling with her homework when she would usually hide her homework book and tell us she did not have any homework. Thanks for making this possible for Judy.*

12 months later I received the following report.

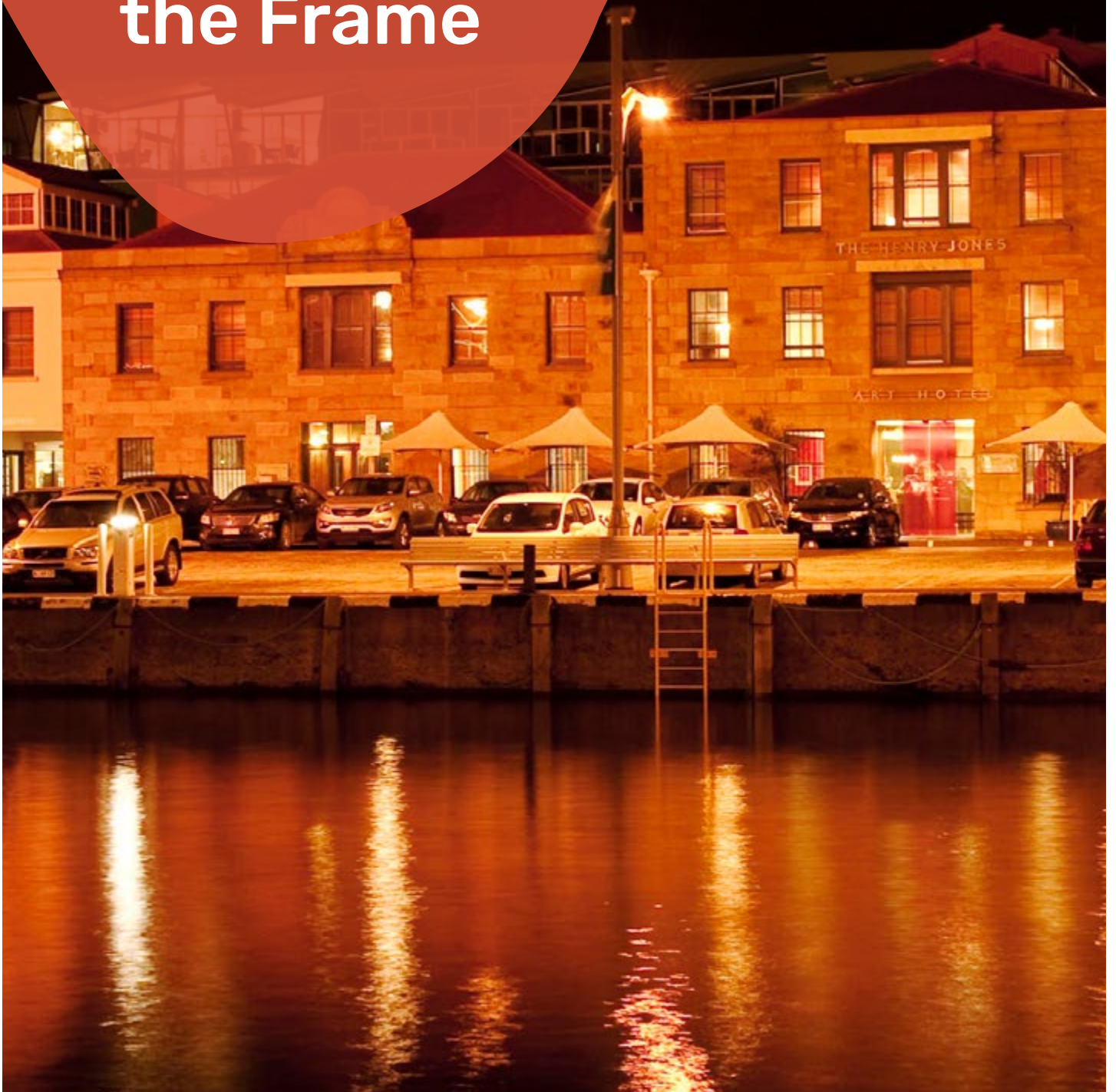
*I am pleased to advise you that the tutorial sessions Judy has with her father continue to be a success. Judy has completed her latest project at school with the result being 27/28 or 96% (the highest marks in the class). The teacher's comments indicated that the content of the project covered all of the marking criteria and that the point lost was related to punctuation. Judy has also changed in that she now looks forward to going to school and is confident in completing her school work or talking about what she has studied. Judy and her father also enjoy spending time one to one discussing different topics which has given them a more normal relationship. Please thank everyone involved in organizing these tutorials and let them know that I feel Judy is now going to enter high school as someone who looks forward to learning and that she now knows if she puts in the extra time to study she is capable of getting good results.*

The following week Judy's name was called out in the school assembly, and she was presented with a certificate for the student showing the most improvement in school. For Judy, this remarkable turnaround didn't come about by simply 'trying harder' or receiving additional tutoring. Such an improvement was made after helping this child to meet one of the most basic relational needs – of a child and her parent.



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# Building and Escaping the Frame





## Building and Escaping the Frame

BY OWEN TILBURY

Owen Tilbury is Director of the Tasmanian Breath of Fresh Air Film Festival, a Community Led Impact Partnerships (CLIP) facilitator, Director of the Tasmanian Innovation Awards, and a consultant and speaker.

**T**hree-year old Ellie is sitting on my capacious Grandad lap listening to stories and chatting about the birds we can see from our verandah sofa. I ask her to pass me my glass and she says: 'No, Grandad, I've got busy hands!' A fresh expression!

Watching children acquire and play with language is fascinating. So, too, is the observation of how language is power. Once a child has mastered the ability to communicate, then can remember to say please and thank you, her world is her oyster and Grandad is putty in her hands. The language she learns also provides the framework for her view of the world. She loses her ball at a Bass Strait beach and in short time she can grasp the idea that the ball will float to Melbourne and be brought back at Christmas by another doting family member.

This framework sets the boundaries for children but also for the adults that they become. David Walsh of the Museum of Old and New Art (Mona) says that his reading of books and visits to museums opened the eyes and broadened the horizons of a boy from Glenorchy. Not all kids have that curiosity and so their world view can be more limited. A child's emotional framework is also set through early experience and language. A child who is talked to, and has things

Once a child has mastered the ability to communicate, then can remember to say please and thank you, her world is her oyster and Grandad is putty in her hands.

explained, feels valued. A child who is told that she is loved feels safe, with a secure place in the family and, by extension, the wider community.

These language boundaries and conventions continue to develop through the experiences at school where the environment – and the all-important teachers – create the frameworks for turn-taking, politeness and interactions with other kids. Those other kids set up the early experience of how one can use language to persuade. They also teach that one can suffer for saying the wrong thing, speaking in a ‘funny’ accent or in a way that is not the norm for the group.

All this means that by the time we are old enough to vote we have our world pretty much framed through literacy and lived experience. Which is amazing but also scary as that frame is both a scaffold and also a prison. Why? Well the ‘scaffold’ is obvious but the ‘prison’ comes from the boundaries and constraints now set in place.

In my experience as a consultant in organisational and community change I have spent much of my life helping individuals and organisations to break out of these boundaries and constraints. And the tool? Language, of course!

Here are some examples.

Picture a group of middle managers (mainly men) sitting in the rainforest on the edge of Lake Dove under Cradle Mountain. It is quiet, serene and surreally beautiful. The group are also quiet and are concentrating on a task: to write a haiku that captures their experience in this beautiful place. Their efforts yield gold as the subject (nature) and the demands of a haiku – a three-line poem with seventeen syllables, written in a 5/7/5 syllable count – forces the managers to think and express themselves in a way that is fresh and unbounded. The ensuing discussion is rich, novel – and enjoyable. We each learn something about ourselves and about the people in our group.

Fast forward to a scene in a community centre where 60 people, drawn from across the spectrum of the disadvantaged community they live in or offer services to, are being led through a process called Future Search. Having spent a day mind-mapping the influences on the community on a huge wall map, and teasing out the 'Prouds' and 'Sorries' of the community, they are about to listen to the four teams present.

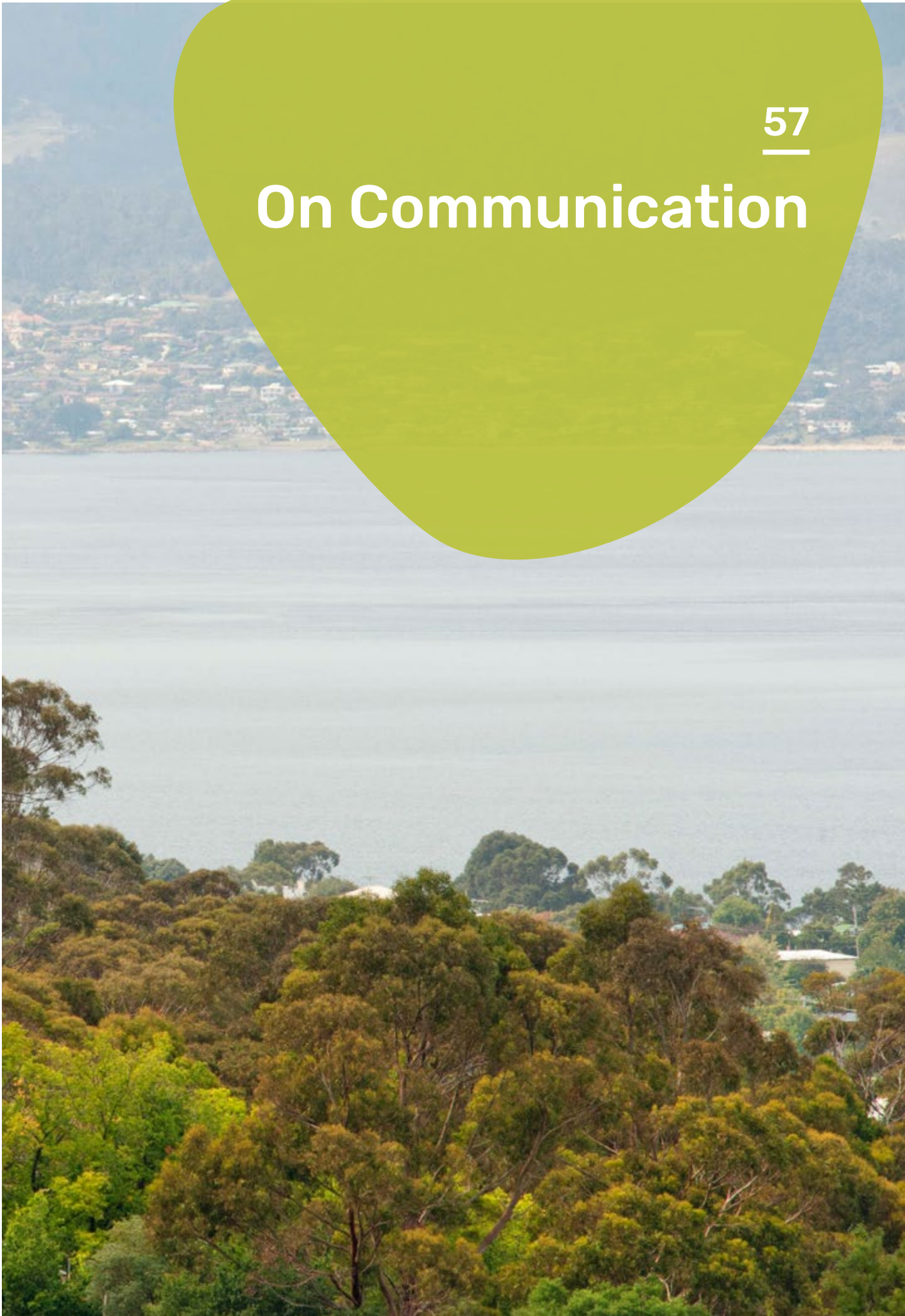
And what presentations they are.

Instead of a Powerpoint with lists of dot points, each team has been set the task of creatively presenting a speech that they will make in 30 years talking about – and acting out in costumes they have designed from craft materials – what they have achieved in transforming this community. By looking backwards from the future, they are able to see differently and to be unbounded by their constraints on what is possible! The result: nine different projects ranging from a new walkway to the CBD, a community garden, better public transport, a social heart, better police services and initiatives to address antisocial behaviour. Oh, and they won a national planning award for their efforts.

So, literacy is much more than learning to read and write. Literacy is using language to understand and control the world. Literacy is being able to think outside the boundaries of our minds. Literacy changes lives.



# On Communication





## On Communication

BY PETER BOYER

Peter Boyer is a journalist who specialises in the science and politics of climate change.

**M**y primary school classroom was on its best behaviour when the headmaster came in to see how things were going. After all, he was the man with the cane.

‘What’s six-and-five-and-seven-and-three-and-four?’ he barked at a deferential class. I don’t really remember the numbers, just the answer. I remember it because a split second after the question ended a boy at the back of the room yelled ‘25’ and got a smile and a nod from the headmaster.

In my time, in the 1950s, primary classrooms were sorted according to test results, with top marks in the front row, where I was proud to sit; they called my type girlie-swots. I was shocked that a lowly-ranked kid had outsmarted me.

That memory has stayed with me down through the decades, through university, working life and beyond. I think I suspected then, as I certainly know now, that academic and other success is no guarantee that you’re the brightest star in the sky. Just one of the lucky ones.

I have indeed been lucky, from the outset. Around the meal table, all six children in my family were exposed to stories and jokes and word-play and quizzes and all the other benefits of conversation.

My thinking has moved steadily away from regressive measures such as more law enforcement and stiffer penalties and towards steps that address the root causes of these problems.

Thanks to my parents, all of us got the longest possible exposure to what was then a world-class public education system in Tasmania, where we learned that knowing numbers and letters and the words they make was really, really important.

But the best part was that learning to read got me into books and stories. When the day was over, with homework done, the football kicked, kindling gathered for the fire and my radio heroes victorious, I would curl up in bed with a book until my father came to turn off the light.

Starting with a huge volume of selections from the classics, a sixth birthday present from my auntie and uncle (I still have the book, inscribed), I moved on through the Secret Seven and Biggles into my parents' grown-up books. That was my entry into the wide world beyond my island home.

Most of all, I was lucky to have a stable home life with supportive parents, free of neglect or abuse. I took that for granted as a child. Heedless of what might be happening in others' homes, I thought that the 'dumb' kids at the back of the class just didn't try hard enough.

My life since leaving school has taught me how wrong I was, starting with a year or so as a court reporter in Brisbane, where I observed the impact on people of poverty, abuse, homelessness and a lack of education.

I began to see the connections between these and many more social afflictions. My thinking has moved steadily away from regressive measures such as more law enforcement and stiffer penalties and towards steps that address the root causes of these problems.

Throughout my life, the divide between law and order on the one hand and social advancement on the other has dominated social and political debate. One side focuses on defending the status quo, the other on ameliorating disadvantage. Reconciliation seems impossible.

I don't see why that has to be so. I can't see why police and judicial agencies can't work together with social services in a common cause. Why is it that our politicians continue to miss the links between childhood stability, education and success, and between abuse, poverty and criminality?

The underlying factor in all these social conditions is the ability to communicate one's needs to others. That requires us to think coherently, put those thoughts in words and pass them on to others, to ask the right questions, and above all to make social connections with others.

When people can manage all this they can generally make a go of things, avoid problems with others and live reasonably well. When they can't, they get into trouble – falling into poverty, abuse and worse. And that downward spiral is almost impossible to stop without outside help.

It doesn't have to be this way. There is evidence aplenty that all people in this sort of difficulty, old and young alike, can turn their lives around if they are taken seriously by others. With explicit instruction, people can be taught at any age to read and write.

Once they have that power all sorts of good things happen, and these things don't stop with the individual. They flow through to families and neighbourhoods and economies. They make for more cohesive communities and a more law-abiding citizenry.

We will always need police and courts because society is a complicated beast. Literacy and the sense of personal empowerment that comes from it will not solve everything. But I can't think of a better place to start.



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# Formed





## Formed

BY RACHEL EDWARDS

Rachel Edwards is Editor-in-Chief of Transportation Press. She has recently been working as a writer in residence with lower literacy inmates at Risdon Prison as part of the LINC literacy program.

I learnt to read soon after I learnt to walk. My mum was a teacher and she took the time to sit with me and gently ease me into a world of books and reading.

This forged me personally and professionally.

When those around me did not know answers, books did.

In primary school it was *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* that taught me about slavery in America. *Playing Beatie Bow* taught me that girls actually existed in history. It was *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* that taught me about periods and *David* by Ivan Southall that taught me about the Holocaust. It was the book on Robben Island that my Grade 8 geography teacher, Mrs Adams, lent me that taught me about Apartheid, which in turn led to some early activism – ‘End Aparthied’ (sic) scrawled into wet concrete near school.

At home I asked about our forests being logged as I was reading about the Brazilian forest activist Chico Mendes, and I was told to ‘go away and read the Regional Forest Agreement’ – which I did. I read Bertrand Russell’s *Why I Am Not A Christian* but the only thing I took from it at that age was the word ‘omnipotent’. In Grade 8 I borrowed *Anna Karenina* from the school library and I had to renew the loan so many times that, when I finished, our wonderful librarian told me I should keep the copy, which I still have today.

They are now writing, reading and performing their own poems and, while I've had nearly enough of car chase rhymes, I celebrate this progression heartily.

I tell you all of this to illustrate how reading formed me and broke me over and over again. Every day it makes me realise how much I do not know. It has given me the tools to realise and understand the space I live in and the world around me. It has nurtured and educated me way beyond the confines of my formal education, and the conservative community into which I was born

In Tasmania I am more privileged than half of us who do not have access to reading and writing – 50% of Tasmanians struggle with basic literacy.

That's 50% of our fellow Tasmanians who struggle to read the dosage on their medicine bottles, sit a drivers licence test, check for ingredients they may be allergic to, read a street sign, a lease or a summons – and it also means that half of us have significantly fewer tools to read the stories of others and therefore better understand our place in the world. This is in no way to diminish those of us who have not been taught literacy. All of us experience love and pain and passion, peace and joy, but only half of us have the extra tools to share and express these that literacy affords.

In prison it is 80% of us with literacy challenges.

I've recently had the fortune to work as writer in residence as part of the dedicated LINC literacy program in Risdon Prison. I've been working with a group of inmates doing slam poetry. Slam offers a dynamic, performative space and one that gives voice to the disenfranchised – which these men are. It has been a frustrating and beautiful ride and the changes I have witnessed in these fellows, many of whom at the beginning were adamant that poetry was not for them, have been significant. They are now writing, reading and performing their own poems and, while I've had nearly enough of car chase rhymes, I celebrate this progression heartily. With 80% of inmates facing literacy challenges it is not a long bow to draw that if literacy was augmented across our entire community we may see a reduction in crime.

I believe that those of us who were privileged to begin with and were given the gifts of reading and writing have a duty of care in our community. There are practical things we can do, like reading a book on a bus, a visual celebration of literature and therefore literacy. We can support our bookshops, and use the wonderful libraries we have on offer all across our island, including inside Risdon Prison. We can call our politicians and let them know that we value literacy, and ask them what they are doing to effect positive change in this space.

We have a choice. We can choose a future where more children are excluded from the power of story through reading and writing, one where we see entire communities further damaged and where illiteracy becomes endemic in some places. This is a Tasmania of increased division and alienation. Or we can take action now to ensure that our island becomes a place where fairness and access to reading and writing are celebrated. This is a world where we all have access to diverse stories – our own, our community's and our universe's.

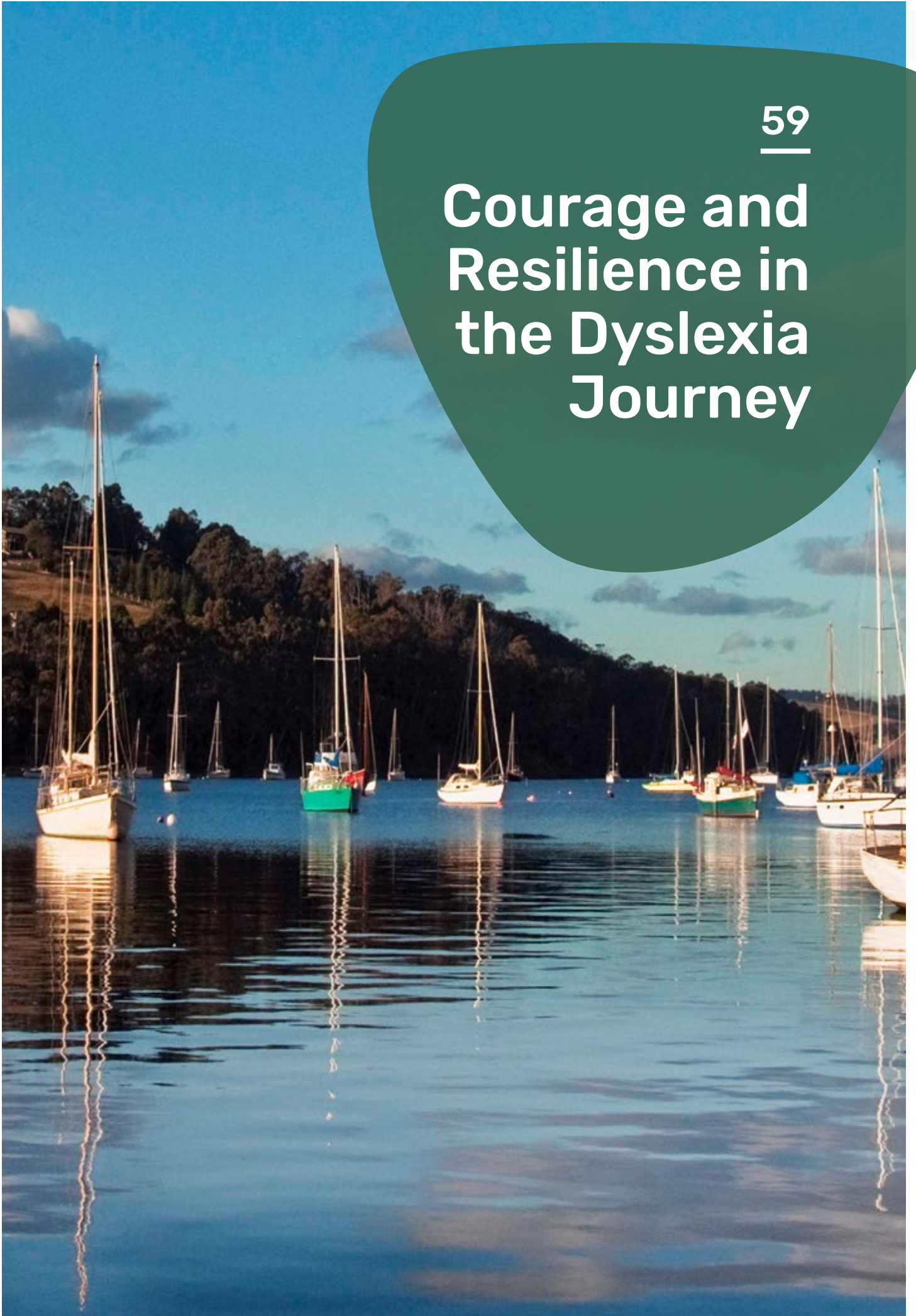


*Something to think about: What action are you going to take for a fairer, more literate Tasmania?*



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# Courage and Resilience in the Dyslexia Journey





## Courage and Resilience in the Dyslexia Journey

BY RACHEL VERMEY

Rachel Vermey is a mother of three beautiful teenage boys. Two of her boys have dyslexia. She shares reflections of her personal experience and her family's literacy journey.

**B**eing a parent of a child with dyslexia can be challenging. Like your child, you need to develop resilience, courage, determination, become proactive and always strive for improved communication.

Seek professional advice from a speech therapist and/or occupational therapist as soon as there are signs that your child isn't reaching benchmarks or is in the lower range of average. Don't be satisfied that your child is just 'a late developer'. In addition to private providers, there is a range of free support, through early intervention services and schools, and you can use GP care plans and or mental health plan to access some Medicare support for specialists' assistance.

Improving literacy skills is a team effort. There is a window where extra literacy support and learning can be really fun, so the earlier you get in the better. Be inventive and make literacy support fun and a game. Making large letters on a brick wall with shaving cream and then shooting water pistols at the different letters was always popular with my boys.

Be inventive and make literacy support fun and a game. Making large letters on a brick wall with shaving cream and then shooting water pistols at the different letters was always popular with my boys.

If there comes a time when literacy support at home becomes a challenge, you can no longer make it fun and smarties no longer cut it as reward, it is good to enlist the help of others. This is when the help of a neighbour, friend, teenager in the neighbourhood, tutor or additional help at school becomes essential.

There also comes a point when you need to be realistic about what reading and writing levels your child is going to achieve. Like your child, you know that they were read to from an early age, that they had lots of literacy support, they are not lazy, they always try hard and they are not dumb, it is just that they have dyslexia and their brain works slightly differently. Fortunately, we live in an age of technology and there are so many programs and tools available to help support someone with dyslexia.

Dragon, Read&Write Gold, reading pens and audiobooks are just some examples. Try them all out and see what works best, as everyone is different and faces slightly different challenges. Also, be mindful that the best option may change over time, with new technologies, changing subjects and changing studying environments.

Schools are a wealth of support, but you cannot become complacent. Positive outcomes are more likely if you work together as a team and keep communication channels open. Touch base regularly, even just by an email. Make sure that at the start of the school year, everyone is aware of your child's strengths and additional needs. Be involved in their learning plans, raise issues when they appear, rather than letting things snowball. Ask and give suggestions for ways your child can maximise their achievements, improve their access to the curriculum and demonstrate their real understanding. Additional time, use of a computer, use of a scribe, alternative forms of assessment such as being able to give a verbal presentation, ignoring spelling and grammar are just some of the modifications that can be made to assessment, even in Years 11 and 12.

Communication and working as a team with a school will get the best result. Never be afraid as a parent or educator to ask questions about assessment methods and criteria. Through keeping communication channels open, last year my sons' school identified and managed to change a marking criterion for a Level 3 English Tasmanian Assessment Standards & Certification (TASC) subject that benefited my son and all students with dyslexia in Tasmania.

The school identified that the proposed wording and changes to the essential criterion for this subject meant that, without accommodation, my son could never pass the subject. Rather than accepting this situation, the school pre-empted the issue and sought clarification from TASC as to whether special consideration would be available. The TASC initially advised that no special consideration was available for this criterion. The school requested a more detailed response and ultimately communication between the relevant stakeholders and TASC resulted in an additional paragraph being inserted into the marking criteria for that particular course that *did* allow for special consideration. This change was brought about by open and positive communication by everyone involved.

I am so proud of my boys, who during their years at school have developed such courage and resilience. They are all going well at school and with small adjustments are now able to demonstrate their true understanding and ability.



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# Communication Community





## Communication Community

BY THE VERY REVEREND RICHARD HUMPHREY

The Very Reverend Richard Humphrey grew up in Hobart and has been the Dean of Hobart based at St David's Anglican Cathedral for nine years. He loves his family, progressive rock music and being part of a growing community of living faith, profound hope and practical love.

A few years ago, a young man came into St David's Cathedral, drawn from the local backpackers by the bells that ring before the 10 am service. He was a refugee from Iran and found the formality of the service comforting even if his English meant that much of the service was mysterious. Soon he was joined in Hobart by his brothers and cousins and others in the Persian refugee community. Within a year from that first service we had a new community at the Cathedral – *kelisa* which is Farsi for church.

This was wonderful but it also meant a whole range of communication issues, both within our services and as we sought to help these new arrivals. There were frustrations on both sides as we sought to explain matters from the vagaries of Australia's immigration policy to why we talk about Jesus so much. I remember the look in my friends' eyes as I could see that I wasn't making sense to them, and my own sense of alienation when they would all suddenly break into Farsi which gave me a taste of what it must have been like for them most of the time. There were some major confusions. When we gave one young man a hammer to do some joinery work believing that he was a carpenter he looked bemused. He had actually said, 'car painter'.

The Cathedral community was committed to help our new friends communicate. Christians believe in a God who communicates, the universe comes into being by his Word, he gives Laws and finally sends his Son, Jesus as the living word, all of which are recorded in his book, the Bible. God is really committed to communication and so should his people be. It is no surprise that something Christians do is teach languages, and often in remote language areas such as Papua New Guinea, learning the language, creating a written version so there can be true communication.

At the Cathedral that meant organising resources to help there be communication. We hired a bilingual Farsi-speaking pastor, we had services and Bible studies in both languages. Members of the community volunteered to help with conversational English as well as many hours filling in immigration forms, which are definitely not English as a Second Language friendly, as well as using courses that were available. It is a great joy now to be able to speak freely with our *kelisa* brothers and sisters, to know what they are thinking and to really communicate, to laugh, sing, learn and pray together. It is also wonderful to see them using those skills in being a productive part of our Australian community.

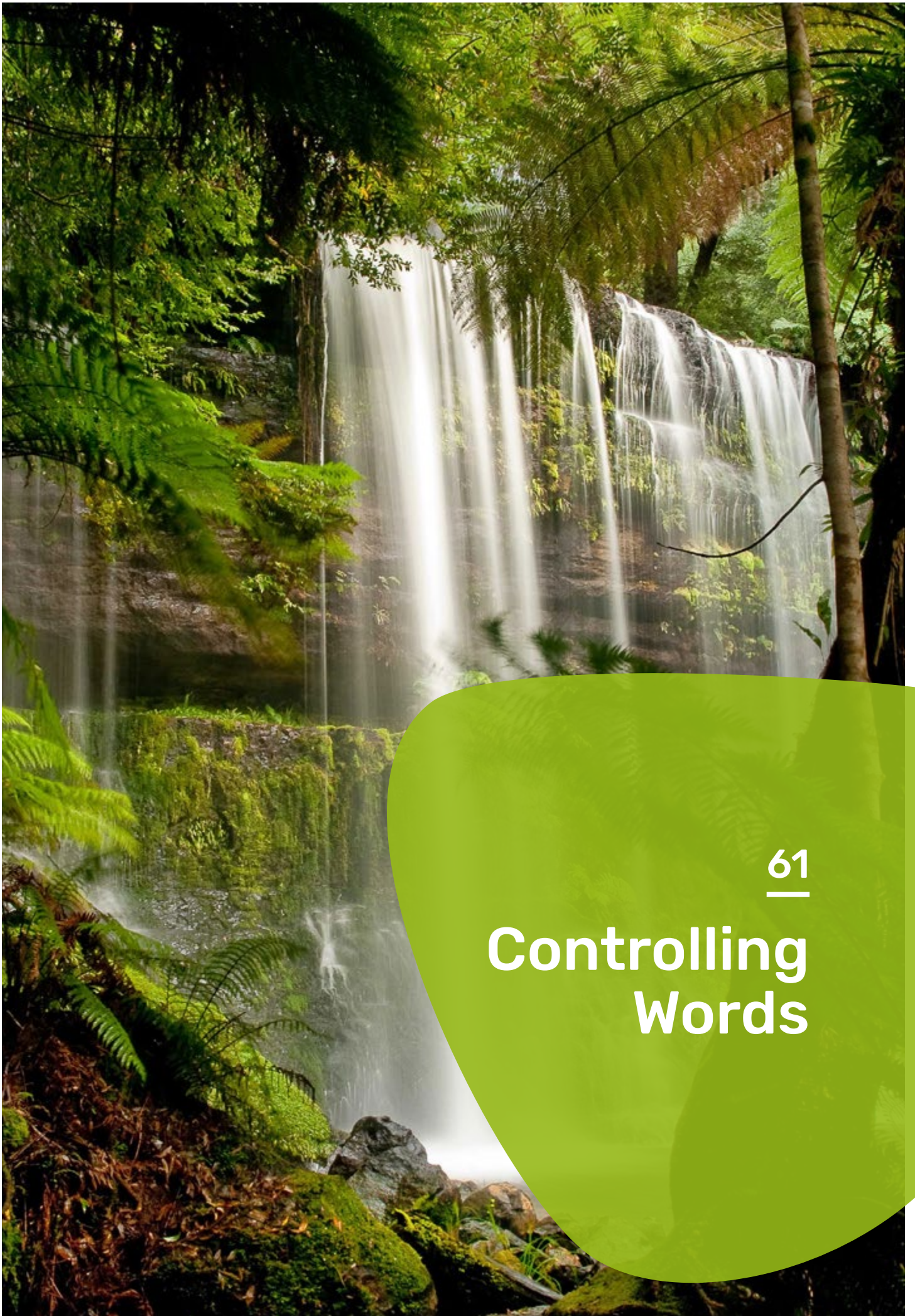
This is a good news story about literacy and communication, but for many in our Tasmanian community the story has not been so good. Many people have not come from another country and do not speak another language, but they are excluded from areas of our community life and from reaching their potential due to low literacy.

Our experience suggests that it takes a community to overcome communication issues. There needs to be welcome into a safe space where there is no judgment but acceptance. There need to be people who will give of their skills, their time but most of all of themselves to help others communicate. God gave of himself to communicate with us; we should give of ourselves to communicate with others and help them to communicate.



*Something to think about: Can true community exist without true communication? and which comes first?*





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# Controlling Words





## Controlling Words

BY RICK SNELL

Rick Snell is Deputy Dean, University of Tasmania Law School until 30 June 2018. He is Chair of The Unconformity festival and a member of the Open Government Partnership International Expert Panel.

**O**n the verge of my departure from the University of Tasmania, a major paradox in my life still remains. I am regarded internationally as an effective communicator. I have presented talks to small and large audiences in over twenty countries from Botswana to Mexico, and lectures and seminars to thousands of law students in several countries.

Yet every time I open my mouth, I am scared that my speech difficulties will betray me. Every time I speak, safeguards are automatically in place. I minimise multi-syllable words (gaining a reputation for accessible language), I use whole sentences so the listener automatically corrects weird pronunciation within the context of that sentence. I add warmth and a slight tone of self-deprecation (a word I would stumble over if I read this out loud) to my voice, making the listener like me regardless of their struggle to understand my exact words.

My speech difficulties started early in life and have persisted. My neighbours remarked how chatty a little boy I was but they were unsure of my nationality as they couldn't make out the words I was saying. Mum and others close to me could understand, with some effort, but strangers were left with the distinct impression I was from another place. The problem was a combination of speed, a struggle to form understandable syllables and difficulties with 'th' and other consonant sounds.

... my communication breakthrough came when I learnt that I could control words – of whatever length and combination – via the written word. On the page (and now screen) I was in control and able to manipulate any word or sentence.

The end product was not the stuttering found in *The King's Speech* (a slight stuttering that was corrected), but I experienced the same crippling level of anxiety, frustration and social isolation – without the castles, servants and money to soften the adversity.

In kindergarten and later at East Launceston and Queenstown primary schools, my speech problems continued. Mum spent constant hours helping me to try to pronounce words under the irregular and infrequent guidance of visiting speech therapists. Several years of struggling to communicate was frustrating to family, teachers and myself. I recall spending my play and lunch times at school in East Launceston on my own, isolated and often fearing having to ask questions in class.

One instance has always epitomised for me the isolation, frustration and spirit-breaking impact of Speech Language and Communication (SLC) difficulties. My teacher in Grade 2 at East Launceston had a name like Swain, Train, Twain. Before you could be excused from class you had to raise your hand and ask 'Mrs Txxxx, can I ...' You can see the difficulties a tongue-tied kid would have with this task. My social life, at that school, ended the day I stood there in tears continually trying to pronounce her name so I could be excused. Faced with gentle but firm insistence that I pronounce her name correctly, there was only one outcome – wet pants and ridicule.

I often start talks at international venues telling a joke about my encounters with Indonesian translators who asked during a presentation within the Indonesia parliamentary building, if I could slow down and confirm I was speaking English.

In addition to slowly learning the techniques I mentioned earlier, my communication breakthrough came when I learnt that I could control words – of whatever length and combination – via the written word. On the page (and now screen) I was in control and able to manipulate any word or sentence.

Despite my own background, the impact and dimension of SLC on many people and their encounters with the legal system was largely an issue I gave little attention to. The high level of SLC skills demanded for a legal education and a profession in law (or related fields) means that the difficulties associated with poor SLC skills are largely invisible or heavily discounted by lawyers and law reformers till recently. At best, efforts to use plain language, avoidance of jargon in conversation and the occasional referral to literacy help programs has been seen as sufficient.

Law students with SLC difficulties (or those like me with ad hoc coping mechanisms) are highly likely to stumble at several potential hurdles and rarely find themselves with law degrees. If they do graduate, they feel like imposters and rarely confide in anyone about their struggles or share their stories.

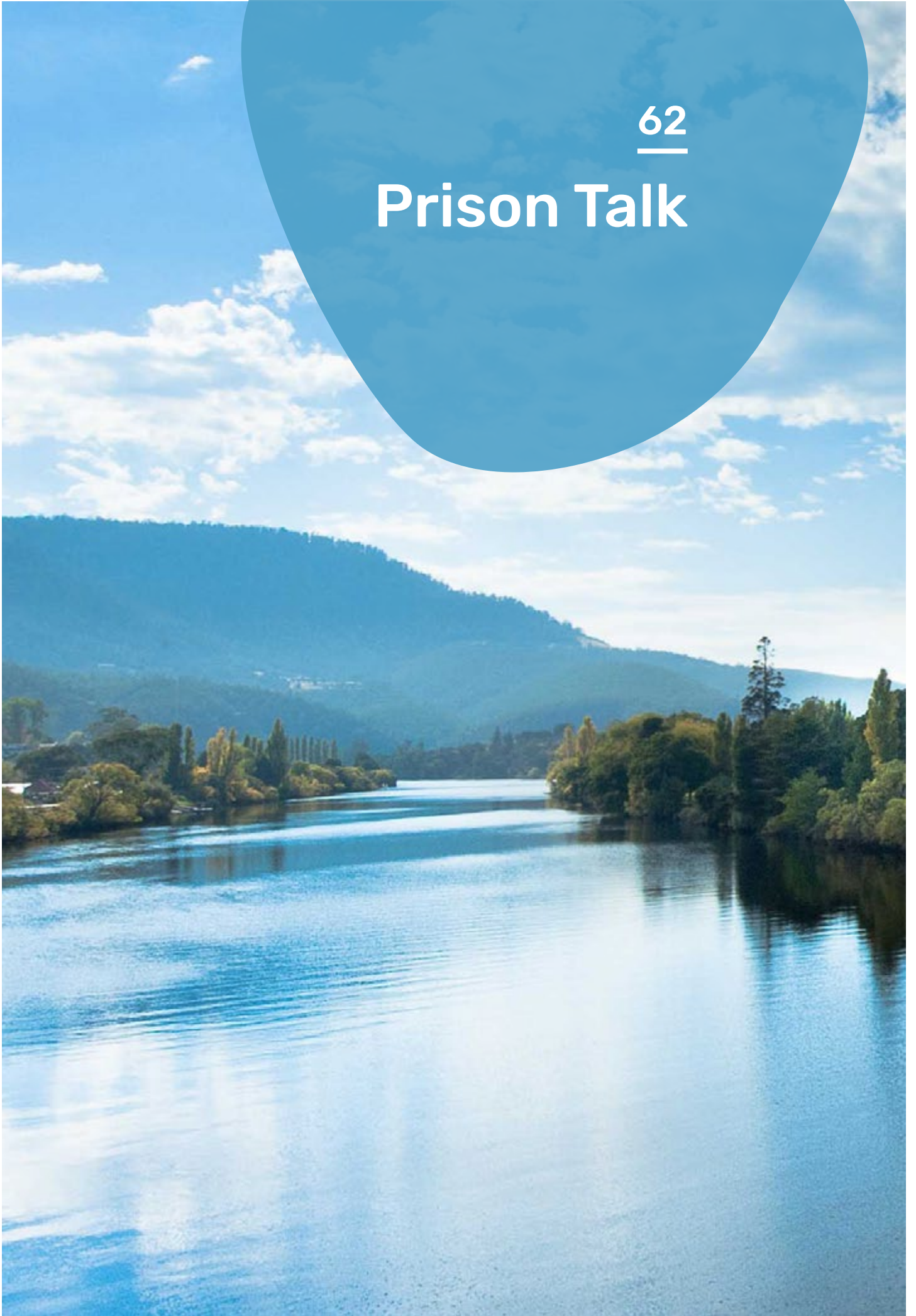
Whilst I started with severe SLC problems, I was able to avoid being towed under. I found a few coping mechanisms, a way around the major problems (via written language) and worked hard and constantly on ways to cope in a job that demands execution of high-performance SLC skills. If I hadn't stumbled onto these mechanisms, the statistics for a young boy from a single-parent family with language problems would have indicated a high likelihood of juvenile delinquency, followed by alcohol abuse, poor lifestyle and a high probability of prison time.

Educators at all levels need to do more to identify and assist students with SLC problems.



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# Prison Talk





# Prison Talk

BY ROB WHITE

Rob White is Professor of Criminology in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Tasmania.

You are what and how you speak. Words matter.

When people are sentenced to prison, the initial jolt is not just deprivation of liberty. It is the shock of having to learn a whole new set of words and meanings that each in their own way are fit for purpose in the carceral environment.

‘Screw’ means prison officer. ‘Dog’ refers to someone who dobs in a mate to the authorities. Lots of words and loads of new interpretations are part and parcel of prison acclimatisation.

Prison talk shapes prison life. It determines whose side we are on. It determines what our future trajectories will be.

Consider this. Indigenous adults only comprise 2 to 3 per cent of the total Australian population, Indigenous children under 18 in the order of 5 per cent. Yet the over-representation of Indigenous people in both adult and juvenile prisons frequently translates into a majority population inside. For example, over 50 per cent of all young people in youth detention centres around the country are Indigenous – the trauma and grief for this community is ongoing.

Peter's status outside the prison very much depended upon his former status as prisoner. It became his stock coin in trade. His self-image was moulded by it, his speech patterns punctuated by expressive and explicit reference to his periods of imprisonment.

The language 'inside', however, has attraction for impressionable people on the 'outside'. Hearing the previously incarcerated speak, especially to each other, can be mystifying and strangely exhilarating for those who personally do not know the code. Learning the lingo, by going to that place, is not fear-inspiring, particularly when it is filled with your familiars.

The language of the prison therefore has its attractions beyond the detractions of its four walls.

It also has its own peculiar ongoing repressive legacy.

I met 'Peter' when he was on day release from maximum security at Risdon. He was, somewhat ironically in the circumstances, studying criminology at the university.

In his last year of university, during the exam period, Peter was granted parole and shovelled out into the wider community. He quickly became known to others as, and reconfirmed for himself, 'ex-con'. This label came to dominate his life, a process that he himself fostered to his advantage.

For instance, Peter continued his studies, undertaking an Honours degree and later commencing a PhD. He worked part time as a tutor during this period. Imagine the response when, mid-tutorial, Peter would announce to his class that he was an ex-con and then proceed to tell his criminology charges the 'real story' about life inside. Criminological study was never more 'applied' and 'relevant' than when Peter supplied the insights.

But the manner of the ex-con, at least in Peter's case, is to puff up and speak lots. It is to pontificate and to 'know everything', to stretch the limits of credibility, and to lean on experiences outside the ken of the everyday person. Peter's status outside the prison very much depended upon his former status

as prisoner. It became his stock coin in trade. His self-image was moulded by it, his speech patterns punctuated by expressive and explicit reference to his periods of imprisonment.

Five years after release and Peter still relied upon secret prison knowledge, squirrelled-away slang words, and public huff and bluff to make his mark on the community around him. He was unable to escape his past as now the past was what constituted his most precious resource in the present – a unique, compelling and colourful identity. He was a ‘someone’ precisely because he was ‘one of a kind’ in the academic cloisters that he now inhabited.

Peter was locked in a linguistic cage of his own making; his self-worth intimately constructed on a platform of past transgression to which he was living memorial.

By one of those strange quirks of fate, Peter found a job in another city, because of his academic expertise. Those hiring him did not care about his recent past. They did not care about his former illegal exploits. They wanted to employ someone whose knowledge of a particular field excelled their own.

For Peter, this was a slow moment of revelation. Slow, because even as newly formed acquaintances and employment situation diminished the social power of his ex-con persona, his speech patterns took years to change.

Today, Peter speaks like a free man. Exaggeration occasionally slips through; bluster surfaces once in a while. But as the prison talk receded, so too did the limited mentality to which it made reference. Now, the words he uses are suited to a different reality. Now, his speech is free of old affectations. Now, Peter is oriented toward the future – instead of being mired in the past.

Prison talk has consequences for those inside, for those outside, and for those coming outside. It is a ‘divide and conquer’ language of survival and coping. Yet far too often it also signals the death of hope and shredding of horizons.

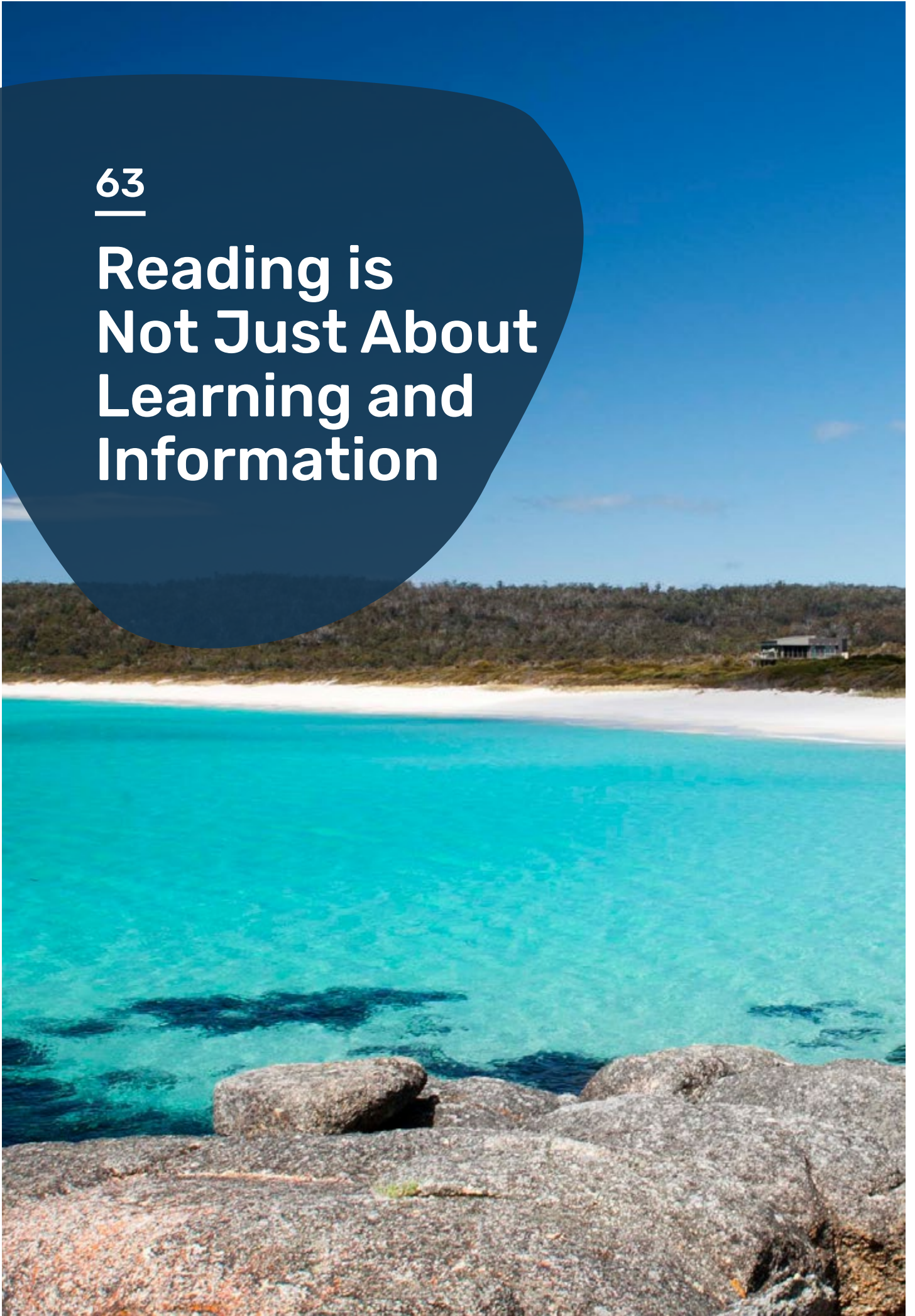
Some offenders ought to be in prison but many, indeed most, should not be there. There are other ways to define who we are and what we might become. There are other ways to punish, repair the harm and make things right.

Without prisons, there would be no prison talk. We need fewer prisons.



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# Reading is Not Just About Learning and Information





# Reading is Not Just About Learning and Information

BY DR RON FREY

Dr Ron Frey is a developmental psychologist and a child and family therapist who specialises in assisting children and families affected by trauma and family violence. He is a visiting fellow in the School of Psychology and Counselling at the Queensland University of Technology and an adjunct senior researcher at the Tasmanian Institute of Law Enforcement Studies.

**W**hen we think about reading, we tend to mainly think about the information we derive from reading, and this is certainly one of its values. But we often fail to think of the many side benefits of reading; for example, the opportunities it gives us to shift our minds to other places, times and topics, to take short holidays anywhere a book might lead us.

Yet, important as this is, there is something special which happens when we share a book with others. Reading is a source of connection between people, and a very important one at that. Writing is how people have traditionally communicated their ideas with others, and reading is how people have received the thoughts of others communicated to them.

It is how friends have said hello, and lovers have said 'I love you'.

It is the sharing of our minds, our experiences, our discoveries, our lives. It is the thought of a philosopher, the report of a scientist, the order form of a businessman. Reading binds us to each other, and to the world around us. It

With our parents, we explored the Amazon, went into deep space, discovered the Antarctic, learned about atoms and molecules.

connects minds separated by distances, or united by living under one roof and in the same household.

The power of reading to foster human understanding and the attachment of one individual to another can hardly be overstated. In learning of others' worlds, we learn of their minds and lives, and this education infiltrates their lives with ours.

We cannot live all human experiences, and that is no doubt for the best, but through reading, we can come to understand so many people in so many places that we can absorb and learn from their experiences, and allow their lives to enrich ours.

It is not accidental that older individuals spend time preparing their memoirs, as they do not want their life lessons to be forever lost, and through reading and writing, we can make a contribution to those around us which can in fact outlast our own lifespans.

One very special but often neglected contribution which reading can make is the connection it can forge between parent and child. For parents wishing to become closer to their children, reading together becomes a powerful tool to enhance attachment.

Many of us will recall with nostalgic pleasure those quiet evenings in our childhoods when, the day done, the evening meal finished, the final chores completed, the television and computers turned off, our parents sat close to us, perhaps even held us, whilst they read a book to us. Together, with them, we co-created the author's world, whether it be an adventure fighting dragons, a wardrobe which like the book itself was a portal to another world, or simply a moment whilst we laughed together at the school principal who thought he was a superhero. With our parents, we explored the Amazon, went into deep space, discovered the Antarctic, learned about atoms and molecules.

But exciting as they are, these adventures are not what we remember most. It was that quiet time, when for a moment we seemed to be the sole focus of our parents' attention; in that moment we learned what we meant to them and they meant to us.

Yes, we were sharing a book, an adventure, new knowledge, but even more so, we were sharing love, and reminding each other at the end of a busy day, filled with so many distractions, what was really important in our families: the love we had for each other.

If you are in a place in life where you have children, and where you would like to improve your relationship with them, consider reading to them.

Make up and write stories with them, re-tell them stories of your life or their own lives. This, later, is how memories are created and consolidated; children who are told about their childhoods tend to remember their childhoods later in life.

So pick a time of day, probably at night before they go to bed, and make it a special time. Everything stops; the phone is not answered, screens are shut off, tablets put away (unless you intend to read from them), no one is allowed to infringe on this time or interrupt – this is a sacred, special time you are sharing with your children. And read to them. Or have them read to you. Or both. Or tell them stories, but use the time to co-create worlds, lives and adventures with your children.

You will find that your relationship with them improves, even if it needs only a little improvement, and you will find that bedtime routines are easier, as your children end their day in the knowledge that they are the most important things in your life, not tablets, or screens or work. We all know they are, yet how often do we forget to let them know this! But a nightly routine of reading to your children is a way of ending each day with love.

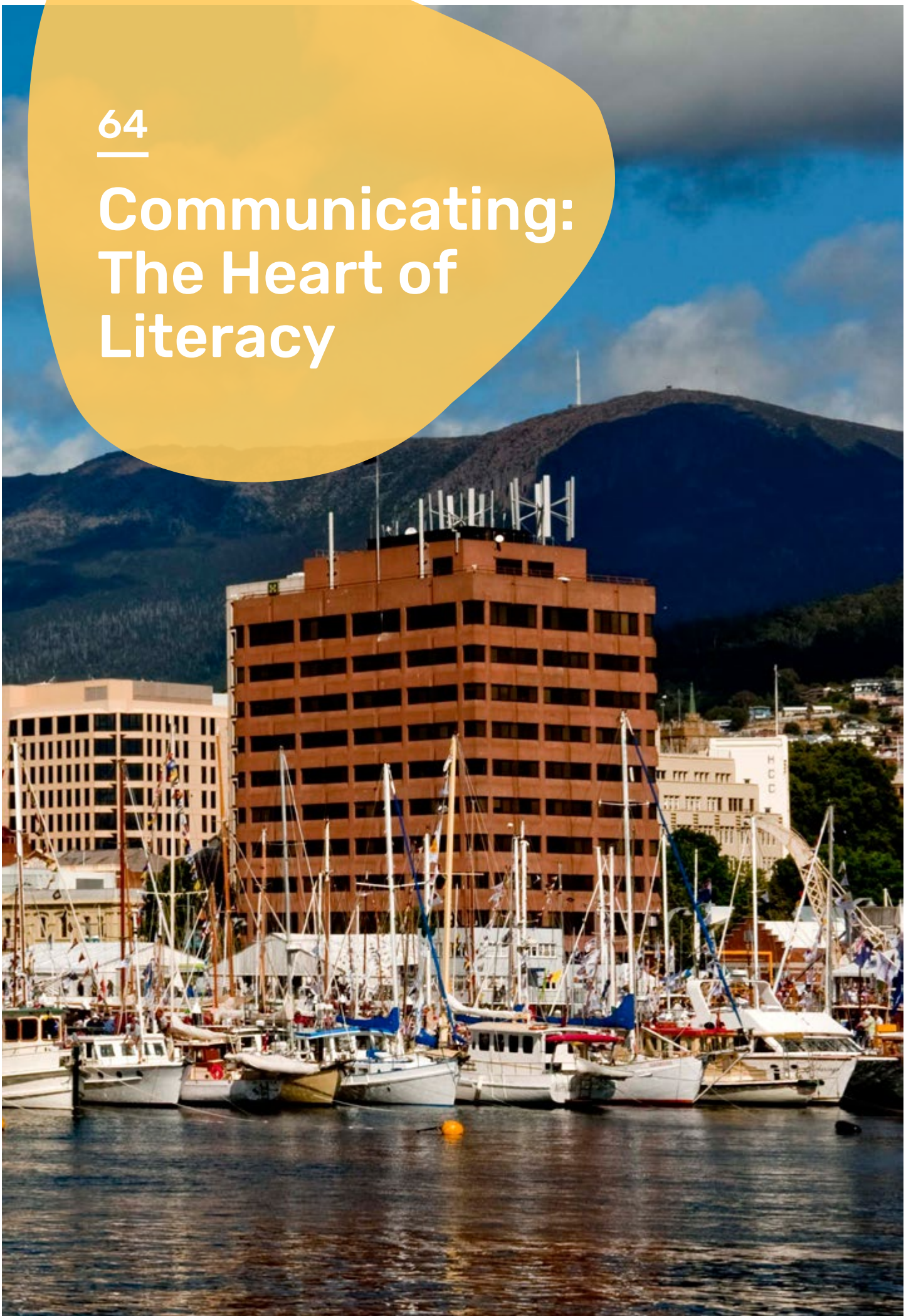
I know of no better way to end a day, or a short essay.

What memories will your children have of special times with you?



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# Communicating: The Heart of Literacy





# Communicating: The Heart of Literacy

BY ROSIE MARTIN

Rosie Martin is a Hobart-based facilitator, speech pathologist, criminologist and 2017 Tasmanian Australian of the Year. She is passionate about building understanding amongst policy makers and other community members of the helping and healing power of communication and warmly connected relationship.

Communicating back-and-forth builds *language* in individuals and communities – and language is the foundation for becoming literate.

For the majority of people this means *spoken* language, but not in all cases – for people who may not hear or produce speech can still develop language in other modes.

Language is the system of shared symbols which groups of people and communities use to represent the outer world in which they live, the inner world of thoughts, emotions and abstract concepts, and to communicate with each other about these worlds.

In the case of spoken language, the ‘symbols’ are the patterns of speech sounds which form the words themselves. Written words are visual symbols made up of letters. The word ‘literate’ first came into English meaning ‘lettered’, or, ‘one who knows letters’. In English the arrangement of the letters within a word is based primarily upon the patterns of speech *sounds* (phonemes) within the spoken word. To process written letters back into speech, skill in processing the *phonemes* is also needed.

After all, it is the voice of every instrument in the orchestra which creates the beauty that leads to the ovation of success.

Communicating, interacting and using spoken language positively are the powerful processes which attune human beings to the spoken-word-symbols by which to keep building language for communication throughout life.

Infancy and childhood are especially critical periods for this development. In typical development, these interactions also attune people to the phonemes within those spoken words.

Discernment of the phonemes allows links to be made between the phonemes and the letters on the page. These links are essential for making the transition from spoken to written language: they are what permit people to become 'lettered' – or literate.

And with this skill they can then go on using the letter-code of written words to help the continual expansion of their language and vocabulary. Regarding the *mastery* of literacy, communicating is at the heart.

But many amongst us – in Tasmania and the nation – are unable to read and write well enough to manage the demands of daily life when those demands are in written form.

The fact of this diminishes our collective dignity, agency, wellbeing, economic opportunity and safety.

Yet with very few exceptions, *everyone* can learn to read and write if given effective, tailored, direct instruction within trusted relationships that both inspire and challenge.

There is much reason to hold great hope. And to pursue it.

Further, communication has yet another principal place in the journey to becoming a fully literate state (and nation): it is at the heart of collaboration.

Collaboration involves listening to all stakeholders, giving attention to robust data from clinical research and human story, and remaining open and



curious without judgment. These are skills. They can be developed. They are underpinned by relational trust. Which can also be developed.

After all, it is the voice of every instrument in the orchestra which creates the beauty that leads to the ovation of success.

Positive communication requires attention and intention. This is made clear by its contrast. During discussion of ‘heated’ and ‘divisive’ topics it is common to hear exclamations of ‘why can’t we be grown-ups and have a mature conversation about this?’ There’s an easy answer. Many of us do not have the communication awareness and skills to have this mature conversation.

Human beings are a-bristle with subconscious trigger-points which, if activated, disrupt generous attention to others and communication with them. Even the highly literate struggle with these emotion-based responses.

Understanding and being willing to repair our own communication trigger-points (this is self-knowledge), as well as to authentically and empathically understand the ruptures of others, are skills that are at the heart of achieving Tasmania’s literacy goals.

We need these skills to become commonplace across our many contexts – for they support our richest collaboration.

Progressing intransigent problems requires many voices and orchestration of the array of insights which they hold.

Skills of careful listening, not judging, staying calm, and being curious and open create the conditions in which individuals presenting their views can be ‘seen’ and ‘heard’ in the honour of their identities and human worth. Dialogue is called for. Not adversarial knee-jerk responses.

In his book *On Dialogue*, David Bohm writes: ‘In a dialogue ... nobody is trying to win. Everybody wins if anybody wins.’

Gaining and widely sharing *these* communication skills holds potential to yield vast improvements of literacy rates in our state: these skills are at the heart of Tasmania’s literacy solutions.





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Accessibility





# Accessibility

BY RUTH CROSER

Ruth Croser is a teacher and occupational therapist with a special interest in exploring ways in which technology can be a tool to realise the potential in people.

‘Oh, it was so frustrating! I kept falling further and further behind! I couldn’t hold and control the pencil properly and I found myself choosing words that were smaller and easier to write than larger words that I knew would have communicated things more accurately!’

So stated a very insightful teacher participant in one of the professional learning workshops I was facilitating recently. He was giving feedback about his experience handwriting in an activity that simulated the sensory and movement planning challenges some students in schools face when having to handwrite.

Don’t get me wrong – as an occupational therapist and teacher I am very interested in the development of functional handwriting skills and the teaching thereof. However, once children reach Grade 3 and 4 the emphasis in the classroom shifts from learning to read and learning to write to reading to learn and writing to communicate understanding, ideas and thinking. Those who have difficulty reading and/or writing may not be given opportunities to access new learning in ways that are not text-based. They may not be given the option to demonstrate what they know without needing to use handwriting. Yet many of these students have incredibly rich thoughts and understandings to communicate on the topics they are given. What they can put forward in a verbal discussion or presentation eclipses the content they can convey in handwriting. Like the frustrated teacher in the activity mentioned earlier,

Text-to-speech features, voice-to-text dictation, grammar-based text prediction, features for those who are blind, hearing impaired or with physical disabilities – these devices are already there in the settings, just waiting to be enabled at no extra cost.

they can only convey a fraction of their thinking. Frustration builds. Self-consciousness and embarrassment increase. Avoidance tactics are engaged. Sometimes these lead to disengagement from education and especially any learning activities that have a literacy component.

All students deserve the dignity of being able to present their thinking and creative expression to the best of their ability. Where the critical learning goals for the lesson do not specifically involve building reading or handwriting skills without supports, then multiple means of learning, expressing thinking and doing the task should be planned for and accommodated. Having multiple tools in the toolkit of literacy options really helps the student to have a right-fit option for the task and the context they are in. For example, some students might type in one context and use voice entry in another. They might use text-to-speech options on a phone or tablet with headphones to listen while reading a digital book on a bus, and use a pen reader and headphones to read a paper-based book in class.

The perennial cost-challenge for families and schools raises its head at this point. Certainly, funding support systems to enable and facilitate technology options for students and prevent disengagement from learning are so important, along with funding to enable training for those supporting the students in use of the technology.

Encouraging, though, is the reality that many technologies that were once specialist software or equipment are now embedded into operating systems in everyday devices such as phones, tablets and computers. Text-to-speech features, voice-to-text dictation, grammar-based text prediction, features for those who are blind, hearing impaired or with physical disabilities – these devices are already there in the settings, just waiting to be enabled at no extra

cost. Web browsers such as Chrome, Edge and Safari have freely available extension tools to help people read and access information and produce text.

I sometimes hear concern expressed that allowing the use of typing or voice-to-text instead of handwriting for the student who has significant handwriting challenges will prevent them from building handwriting skills.

In fact, research studies indicate the opposite for students from mid/upper primary years onward. Providing alternative ways of producing text and the supports that enable a well-constructed and presented piece of writing to be produced builds confidence, increases engagement and perhaps most importantly increases persistence in keeping on building literacy. Not just through using the technology, but also preparedness to keep plugging away at reading and handwriting without the supports. Which brings me to my next point ...

All students equally deserve the dignity of support to build their literacy skills using the most evidence-based effective strategies, and this also should be sensitively accommodated within their learning.

It is no either-or. It is both-and.

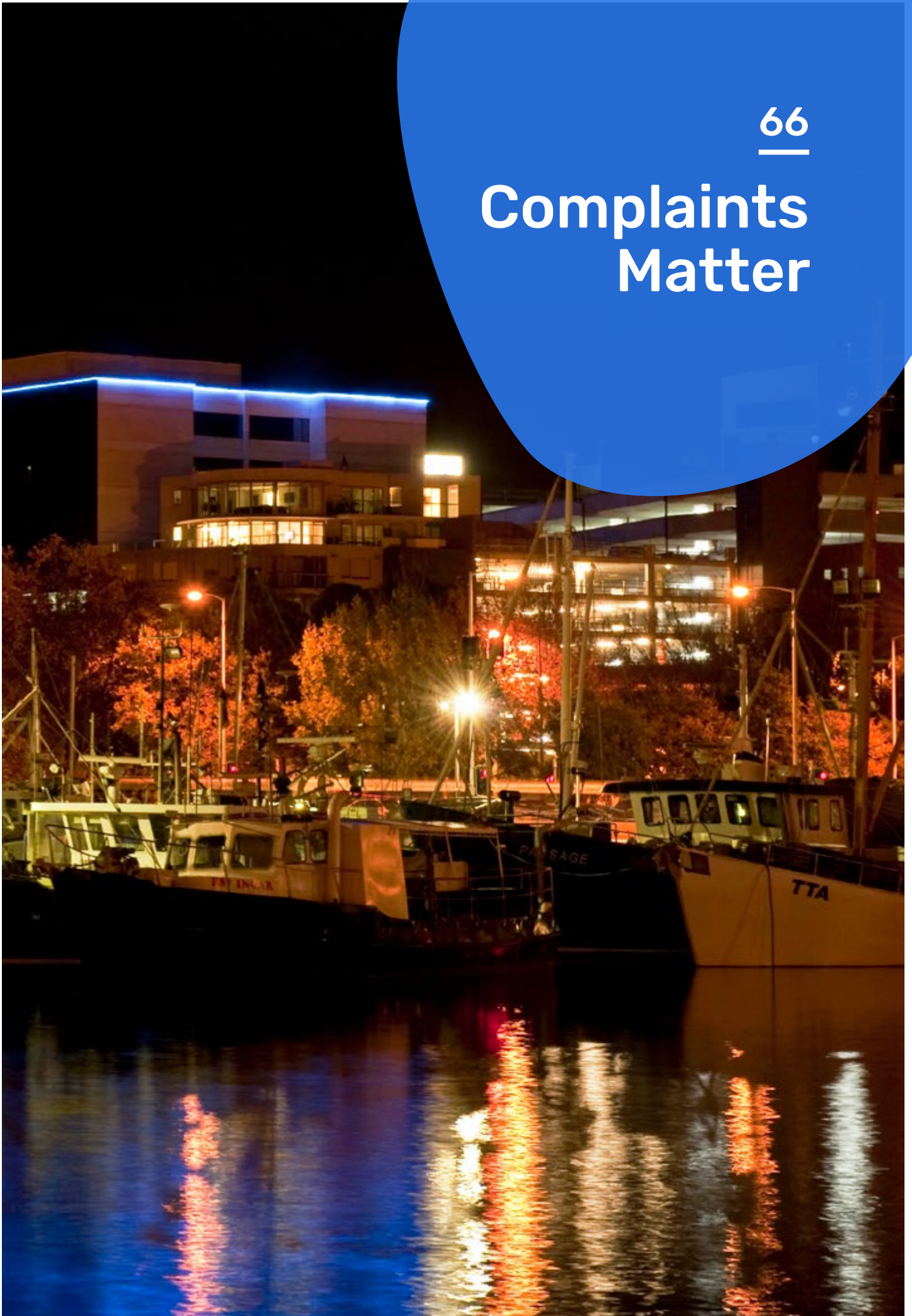
Many of the once-specialist accessibility tools are now used by all of us as options in everyday life (searches using Siri, voice activation of smart home systems such as Alexa, voice-to-text systems used in professional business environments and homes alike). We use handwriting in one context, voice-command or dictation in another. Our trade and business work environments and processes are often far more flexible in accommodating technology supports and alternative ways of communicating (video conferencing) than our academic environments have been. Though this is changing.

Let's seize the day! We have the opportunity to connect with each other in a variety of more inclusive ways that enable more voices to be heard, opinions expressed, and creative ideas explored. There are new possibilities and ways to communicate and collaborate. This, after all is what literacy is all about.



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# Complaints Matter





# Complaints Matter

BY SARAH BOLT

**Sarah Bolt is Tasmania's  
Anti-Discrimination Commissioner.**

While often viewed in the negative, history has proven that complaints have been a valuable key to change.

If those with vision impairment had not complained loudly and clearly, they would still be standing at the lights waiting for a sighted person to tell them the green man was flashing.

If women had not complained about the difficulty of juggling work hours around family responsibilities, flexible workplace practices may not exist.

If both men and women hadn't complained, we would still have the requirement that all police officers must be of a certain height and strength which prevented many people from even applying to join the force.

If women hadn't complained, they still may not have the right to vote.

If the parents of children with disabilities hadn't complained, their children would still be marginalised and sent to 'special' schools rather than, in most instances, being able to receive a mainstream education.

These are just a few examples of where complaints have been the key to positive change.

The 'me too' campaign is the most recent example of where attitudinal and behavioural change is happening, brought about through people, primarily women, giving a voice to their complaint against sexual harassment.

If you know somebody who should complain about discrimination or unlawful behaviour, but they lack the literacy skills required to make a complaint, I would encourage you to support them through the process.

The Anti-Discrimination Act (the Act) is a valuable tool for people who have been treated less favourably on the basis of an attribute, such as age, race, gender or disability, to lodge a complaint. There are many other attributes under the Act.

If the complaint is accepted and proceeds to conciliation, there is a very real chance that the matter will be resolved. Complaints and the resolution process often bring about positive outcomes that affect not only the parties to the complaint, but possibly other people in the wider community.

Despite the protections under the Act, under-reporting of complaints remains a matter of concern. Many people are enduring unlawful discriminatory behaviours every day and yet they remain silent, rather than complain. The reasons for under-reporting are many, and range in complexity. It is, however, fair to assume that lacking the literacy competence to navigate complaint-land is a very real factor.

Indeed, there are many Tasmanians who would struggle to make sense of what I have written, let alone articulate allegations of discrimination through writing as required by the legislation.

Lacking the capacity to complain immediately increases a person's level of disadvantage. Ways that better enable those lacking literacy capacities must be explored, promoted and encouraged to enable all Tasmanians to have voice.

Whether it is form-filling, reading instructions, reading for pleasure, speaking clearly or understanding what is being said, one thing is clear – literacy is a cornerstone of inclusivity.

All of us have a responsibility to do what we can to equip all Tasmanians with the literacy skills that will enable them to navigate all aspects of legal and civil activity.

If you believe that you have been treated unlawfully or discriminated against I would encourage you to lodge a complaint.

If you know somebody who should complain about discrimination or unlawful behaviour, but they lack the literacy skills required to make a complaint, I would encourage you to support them through the process.

For those of you who may receive a complaint, I would encourage you to consider that positive outcomes may result as a consequence of dealing with the issues raised.

It is because of complaints that we live in a society in which equality is seen as a better alternative to inequality.



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# A Seed Planted and Watered



## A Seed Planted and Watered

BY SARAH KAY

Sarah Kay is a mother of four, a former home educator, speech pathologist and lover of words.

They're ready.

I'm a-buzz with excitement. I've deemed that all four of my children are now ready for me to read them *The Journey of the Stamp Animals* – my favourite novel from my own childhood, and my most treasured material inheritance from my mother.

*The Journey of the Stamp Animals*, by Phyllis Hay. First published in 1948. It was a school book prize from Mum's third grade. I can still hear her low soothing voice as she began to read this to me, more than thirty years ago ...

*Nobody knew there was magic in the Post Office, and even if they had been told about it, people would only have laughed, for few now-a-days have time to believe in magic. But the fact remains that there was. A mischievous Ink Gnome was responsible for it. His name was Splodge and he looked just like a blot of ink, only he was very round instead of flat ... One night when Splodge was sitting on a piece of blotting paper singing to himself, he thought what fun it would be if he could meet the animals whose pictures were on postage stamps, the Koala Bears, Kangaroos, and all the other ones ... There was movement under the paper. It was just a tiny bump at first, but it grew and grew. Then another bump appeared, and another and another ... When they had all grown*

The seeds of interest in my many fields were planted and watered with joy and passion, with diligence and love.

*to life size, they began to breathe and make animal sounds. Splodge thought they looked rather lovely and very strange. The kangaroo seemed less startled at these happenings than the others ... ‘Well,’ she said, ‘this is surprising...’*

As I gleefully anticipate the deliciousness of sharing this book with my own four, I recognise an extraordinary thread. A glittering thread of living literacy passed down with definite intent from one generation to the next, and then to the next. The intentional planting and the tireless watering of the seeds of literate futures.

I give honour and acknowledgement to the richness of the literacy involvement that my parents had in my life. The gradual finesse in the mechanics of reading and writing being sure-founded and pre-empted by the love of reading, the love of books, and a love of the life-giving-ness of words themselves.

Before the written word comes the spoken word. How splendid that every day we might offer up to our children a bouquet of words! The bouquets I received growing up were from those who overtly:

- exclaimed at the beauty of the natural world – ‘The vision splendid!’
- delighted in all manner of stories
- swooned along to scores of classical music
- were deeply stirred by a rousing song – ‘Awake not yet from thy repose!’
- delighted in the fruitfulness of the vegie patch
- were enraptured by the fine strokes of an artist
- were moved by a poet’s view
- loved sharing stories from their own lives
- never tired of plays on words, playing with words, and family quotes of the week.

The seeds of interest in my many fields were planted and watered with joy and passion, with diligence and love. The mechanics of spelling, punctuation, grammar and paragraph organisation were ever-present, but they knew their place as tools to assist with the more joyful task of the getting and giving of so many important and worthy messages. A glorious inheritance.

I am fully aware that mine was not a childhood common to all. Mine may be considered merely a flowery story to some.

What shall I say to this then?

Firstly, that I can be but wholly grateful to those who have given so much of themselves for my own growth. And secondly, that, from my own personal vantage point now, I am so glad to be in a position to give back. To plant, to water, to tend new seedlings for other literate futures.

The story I bring is indeed a too-simplistic notion, in and of itself, as many collectively consider the broad and deep literacy challenges in our own cherished community. But may these thoughts be gathered up and held with the other collected thoughts.

Allow me to salute the ‘collaboration’ of the generations in the passing-on of rich literate foundations. And may we, whilst formulating policies and standards and programs, remember the spirit of passing on what we have, complete with the joy and passion of who we are.

*The engaged mind, illuminated by truth, awakens awareness; the engaged heart, affected by love, awakens passion – Brennan Manning*





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## The Importance of Literacy: An Economist's View



## The Importance of Literacy: An Economist's View

BY SAUL ESLAKE

Saul Eslake is an independent economist, and Vice-Chancellor's Fellow at the University of Tasmania. He is also on the boards of Hydro Tasmania and Housing Choices Australia, and chair of Ten Days on the Island.

Literacy and numeracy are fundamental to any individual's capacity to engage meaningfully in contemporary society – to find and remain in employment, to access a wide range of essential services, to raise a family, or to participate as a citizen in our democratic processes.

Nowadays, of course, only a tiny proportion of our population is completely illiterate or innumerate – in the way that a much larger proportion was, say, 200 years ago, or that a large proportion of the population of the world's poorest countries still is today.

However, a disturbingly large proportion of the population of many so-called 'advanced' economies, including Australia, is 'functionally' illiterate or innumerate. That is, they may have basic reading, writing and numerical skills, but they cannot apply them to accomplish the tasks necessary to make informed choices and participate fully in everyday life. Those tasks include things such as filling out a job application, understanding workplace health and safety instructions, reading a medicine label, or the nutritional information on a packet of food, applying for a home loan, comparing the prices of two differently-sized but otherwise similar products to determine which represents better value, or helping children with their homework.

If we are to make progress on any or all of these fronts, we need to bring the capacity and performance of our education system up to the standards of the rest of Australia.

According to the most recent survey of adult competencies undertaken by the Australian Bureau of Statistics just over six years ago, as part of an international program coordinated by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, about 44% of Australian adults attained less than 'Level 3' literacy (at which they can, among other things, 'identify, interpret or evaluate one or more pieces of information and make appropriate inferences'). And 54% of Australian adults attained less than 'Level 3' numeracy (at which they have 'a good sense of number and space', and can 'work with ... proportions expressed in verbal or numerical form', among other things).

The proportion of Tasmanian adults attaining less than 'Level 3' literacy and numeracy was higher than in any other state or territory, and above the national average by at least 4 percentage points in each case. Conversely, the proportion of Tasmanian adults demonstrating the highest levels of literacy and numeracy was the lowest of any state or territory.

This is partly a result of our older-than-average population, since both in Australia and in other countries older people typically have lower levels of literacy and numeracy than young adults. But it is also a reflection of the traditionally lower levels of educational participation and attainment by younger Tasmanians compared with their counterparts in every other state and territory.

And this has real consequences for the living standards of Tasmanians, throughout their lifetimes, compared with those of other Australians.

Research by the World Literacy Foundation suggests that people who are 'illiterate', in the sense intended here, earn between 30% and 42% less over the course of their working lives than those who are literate – largely because, if they are able to find work at all, they tend to remain in 'entry level' jobs rather than climbing career ladders and pay scales as more literate people typically do.

Illiteracy also affects people's health. Illiterate people are more likely to adopt poor nutritional and hygiene practices, are more likely to engage in behaviours potentially injurious to their health, and are more likely to have workplace-related accidents.

Illiterate parents tend to have lower expectations and aspirations for their children – which makes it more likely that illiteracy (and innumeracy) becomes entrenched across generations.

And research has clearly established links between illiteracy and crime rates, juvenile delinquency and recidivism.

Tasmania's above-average rates of functional illiteracy and innumeracy are a significant contributor to our below-average rates of participation in employment, our below-average productivity, our below-average incomes, our below-average health outcomes, and our above-average dependence on income transfers from other Australians.

If we are to make progress on any or all of these fronts, we need to bring the capacity and performance of our education system up to the standards of the rest of Australia. But that on its own won't be sufficient, not least because it won't do anything to help those Tasmanians who left school – in many cases before they should have – in years and decades gone by. We also need to be putting more resources into programs like 26TEN, which seek to provide tailored pathways for adults to improve their literacy and numeracy.

As with many other personal or social afflictions, illiteracy and innumeracy are often unfairly stigmatised, making it even more difficult for people who haven't acquired these skills during or after their time at school to seek help, or help themselves. We need to develop and promote programs which treat people with dignity and respect, so that they can participate fully in every aspect of modern society, as is their right.





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# Untangled Paths



# Untangled Paths

BY SCOTT RANKIN

Scott Rankin is the Creative Director, CEO and co-founder of Big hART: a multi-award-winning campaigning arts company, which has been telling stories of injustice for 25 years, using theatre, documentary, music, visual arts. Scott has won three Green Room Awards for Best Direction and Most Innovative Production and is the 2018 Tasmanian Australian of the Year.

Who was that small boy?

The one they were so worried about at primary school.

The one whose hobby was string – tangling and untangling string.

Who loved to sit under dining tables and wind string around the legs of chairs, making a cubby was it ... or a cage. Drive family crazy when it came to dinner time.

Who was that boy growing up?

The one who was so painfully shy. The barefoot one. The family, squatting were they, in the waterfront shed. The boy who was terrified of words, spoken or written. Always watching, green eyed, not with envy, observation, writing in his skull, his mind's eye, the nuances of these noisy adults living around him.

What chance did he have, so uninvolved at school, never raised his hand, never a target for teacher's ridicule, never shone.

Fortunately, I'd slipped beyond the gaze of teachers, trained as they were to focus on the children with the potential to become drones and lawyers.

What was he doing, with his time, that loner, on the river till sundown, in his boats, knots, string, art, maybe at sundown, listening to his mother, tired from work, reading to him, *Swallows and Amazons* ... he knew words were real, but couldn't see them.

Art and string and boats and tears and story, but no TV, didn't have one ... This skinny kid, without shoes, without sports clubs, without birthday parties, with one friend, blissfully unaware there should be more than string and sun and drawing and watching.

Then one day at fourteen, this dullard they were worried about picked up a book, at random, read it cover to cover. Paperback. No reason. To get rid of those concerned adult looks. Teacher's reports – 'an intriguing boy, if only he'd ...' (intriguing was a curse, apparently). A book about a Japanese boy his own age, taught to fly a plane. To wear a uniform. Who kissed his mother goodbye, plane loaded with fuel flew off into the blue, to glory, to find American ships, WW2 Pacific ... and dipping his wing, aim, nose dive, for his mother, anti-aircraft fire, at that ship, no ammunition, fuel laden, to death. A suicide bomber – before the term was invented – my age, a Kamikaze, a divine wind. Dead.

That boy was me.

Why oh why did I pick up this book, of all books? Who left it in my path? Words exploded around me. Imagining worlds through 26 arcane symbols, the same words teachers had tried to bludgeon into me. These divine words like a wind.

I could not work out how to write them, but I understood the door they unlocked. I dived headlong into an ocean of books and words and plays and poems and songs and speeches. Like learning to swim. I began to write. Complex imagined things. Blissfully, expectations were low, so no one noticed, no one tried to diminish the ideas because the words were wrong. Fortunately,

I'd slipped beyond the gaze of teachers, trained as they were to focus on the children with the potential to become drones and lawyers.

I couldn't really remember what words were meant to look like on the page, from book to book – I couldn't see them, I could hear them, but not recall them – regardless, I began to harness their power. I began to write. Whenever the system behind these 26 symbols eluded me, I'd imagine another, weirder way, twisted, unusual. Still no one noticed, so no one inadvertently crushed that faulty but determined emerging voice.

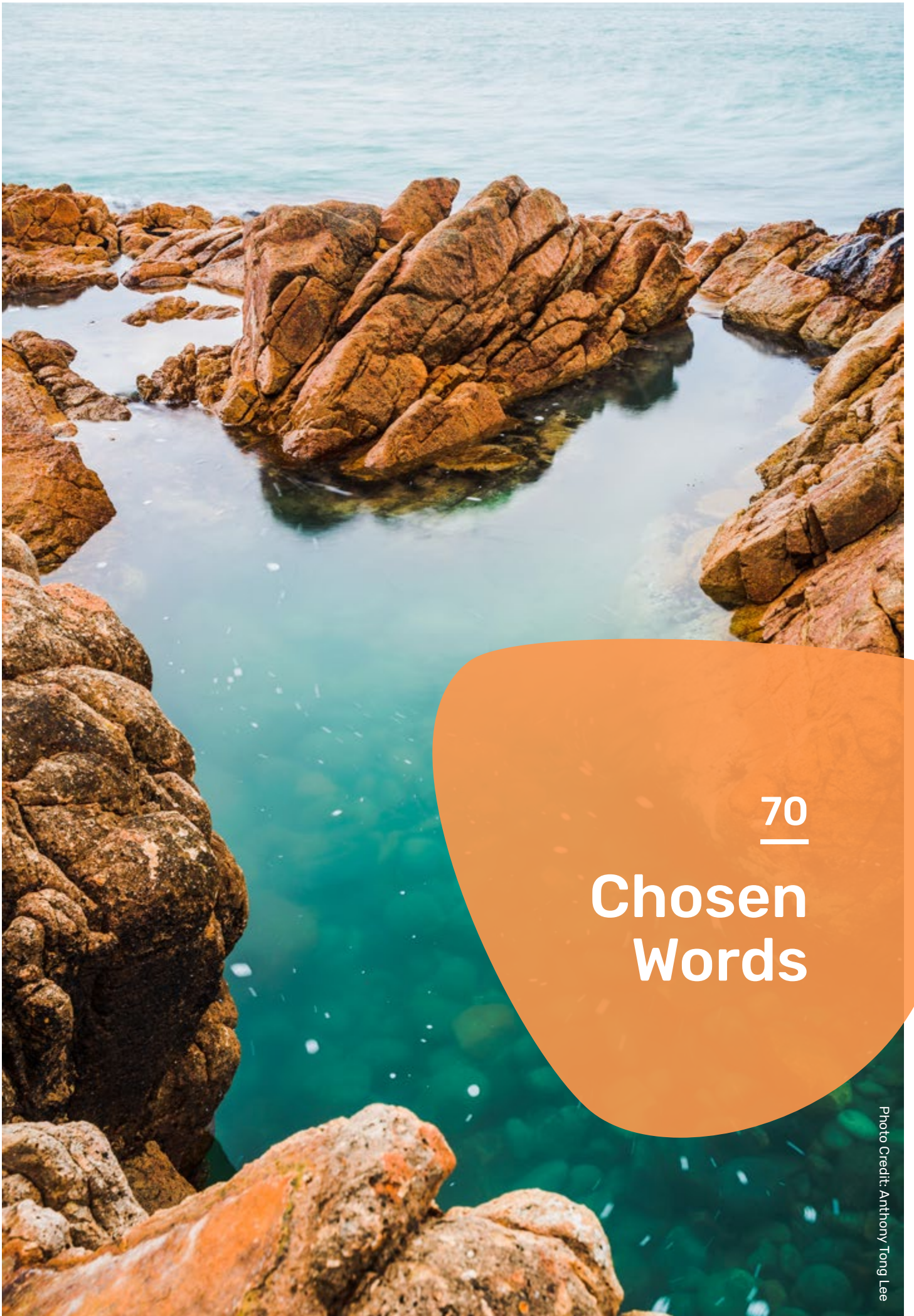
String. Somehow words worked the same way as untangling string. You try to see the whole piece, not the knot of an individual word, and it would come to you, how to untangle this sentence, this paragraph, the meaning. Strange, how few words were needed.

Only two teachers ever taught 'me'. All the others taught the me I was supposed to be. Art. Both let me be, showed me a path, and occasionally, up ahead, I'd see them sweeping leaf litter away, so I could see the fork, the curves, less travelled.

I was the least likely of all the kids cattle-prodded through school to end up writing – theatre, poetry, songs, essays. The least likely to speak publicly, to challenge. I was the kid who blushed, and hid the blush. Beyond quiet, solo, the introvert ... yet that quiet was actually watching, collecting. A resistance. Ignoring.

Perhaps it has partly given rise to Big hART.org – itself an expression of deep literacy. A campaigning arts organisation which tells hidden stories. Outsider stories. Untangles them. Seeing the asset in each person's narrative. Seeing that sometimes those on the margins don't need to be punished because the system unwittingly failed them, they just need someone sweeping the litter from their path. This path of literacy, which is never linear, it's more like a string, which untangles as you walk it.





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# Chosen Words



Abbey Road

## Chosen Words

BY SIMON BEVILACQUA

Simon Bevilacqua has worked as a journalist in Tasmania for almost 30 years. He was born in Melbourne and raised in Somerset, east of Wynyard, on the state's North-West Coast. He has an arts degree and a graduate diploma of librarianship.

I remember fingering through vinyl records as a boy of about 10 or 11 years old.

My parents had given me money for a birthday and I had raced to the local newsagency in the Tasmanian country town where I lived to fossick through a display cabinet that had about 20 LPs in it for sale.

I was buying my first ever album. My older brother and sister each had a couple of records that I had listened to incessantly. Get your own, they demanded.

Going through the LPs, I came across one with four men walking across a road on a zebra crossing. One was dressed in double denim with desert boots. He had long hair and looked so cool. I wanted to look like him one day.

I bought the album on the cover alone and raced home to put it on the family stereo.

'Shoot doom diddly doo, diddly, diddly, diddly, shoot doom diddly doo, diddly, diddly, diddly,' came bursting from the speakers, and then the vocal. 'Here come ol' flat top, he come groovin' up slowly.'

It was the most spectacular, amazing, incredible sound I had ever heard.

The song was Come Together off *Abbey Road* by The Beatles.

The Beatles were long gone and Beatlemania was a thing of the past by the time I bought the album. I thought I was the only person in the world who had recognised the band's brilliance.

I soon learnt otherwise.

I bought every Beatles album I could find. Family bought me books and magazines about the song-writing skills of John Lennon and Paul McCartney. I became a Beatles expert.

Around that time, I returned to Grade 5 after summer school holidays to be told by my teacher: 'I usually ask my class to write a story about what they did on their holidays, but I've decided this year you can all write about whatever you want.'

I was astonished. Anything? I could write anything? The sky could be purple. The people could have two heads. The world could be made of marshmallow.

My head was full of Lennon's fanciful 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds' where a girl with kaleidoscope eyes was waiting at a train station with plasticine porters wearing looking-glass ties and McCartney's elegant story of a girl leaving home, 'silently closing her bedroom door, leaving the note that she hoped would say more'.

Lennon and McCartney were just making it all up, and now I had been given licence by my teacher to do the same.

Still today, about 40 years later, the fact I can write about anything I want fills me with excitement.

In Grade 6, I recall staying home sick with Mum. By this time, I had expanded from The Beatles to solo albums by John, Paul, George and Ringo. One of my favourites was George Harrison's *All Things Must Pass*, particularly the title track, which is about accepting change.

I was taken by Harrison's simple but profound observation that 'sunrise doesn't last all morning' and that 'none of life's strings can last so I must be on my way to face another day'.



Lennon and McCartney were just making it all up, and now I had been given licence by my teacher to do the same.

This was powerful stuff for a 12-year-old. Lying sick in bed, I set about writing my own version of things that changed.

‘What are you writing?’ asked Mum. ‘This,’ I said, and gave her ‘my’ first ever song.

She said it was good. I didn’t tell her that I had copied the idea.

Writing became my fascination. I wrote hundreds of songs and poems and ideas.

Later in high school I started to notice how other students were quicker and more adept at talking and debating. They could come up with puns, put-downs and quips and I had nothing, until a few minutes later when the moment had passed and I came up with the perfect retort.

In university, a friend noted this too, saying that for someone who appeared smart I was awfully slow-witted. He was right.

To this day, as a 30-year journalist, I feel much more at ease writing than I do speaking.

Emotions – anger, depression, sadness, frustration – affect what is said in the spur of the moment. Once something is said, it is hard to unsay it.

How many times do we say something we regret, and in hindsight recognise we don’t actually believe what it was we said but said it out of an instant of anger or frustration or whatever.

Sometimes that anger or frustration is justified, but what we say isn’t because in the moment we instinctively use our words as weapons.

Writing allows us to express anger, joy or whatever in a more effective, considered way. Writing can still be angry and frustrated and explosive, but we choose the words.



We choose.

We can write whatever we like. The sky can be purple. The people can have two heads. The world can be made of marshmallow.

Lennon wrote songs about everything from his father leaving him when he was a boy to his mother dying when he was a teen to being sorry about hurting his girlfriend out of jealousy.

‘Words are flowing out like endless rain into a paper cup, they slither while they pass, they slip away across the universe,’ he wrote in *Across the Universe*. ‘Pools of sorrow, waves of joy, are drifting through my opened mind, possessing and caressing me.’

# Collective Action





## Collective Action

BY SIOBHAN GASKELL

Siobhan Gaskell is a former director of the State Library of Tasmania. Since retiring in 2012 Siobhan has continued working with the Coalition 26TEN.

**T**he 26TEN Coalition currently brings the education, law, health, agriculture, community, training, state government and local government sectors together to work on adult literacy in Tasmania. An influential leader from within each sector works to raise awareness and ask organisations from within their sector to (a) take action to lift adult literacy levels in Tasmania and (b) build a culture where everyone openly seeks to improve their literacy and numeracy skills. Only by taking on the issue of adult literacy through a collective approach can we aspire to lift our adult literacy levels substantially.

The 2011–12 OECD Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIACC) survey showed 49.8% of adult Tasmanians had adequate literacy skills, a figure comparable with the mainland states. As a result, the Tasmanian Government bravely opened up the issue of adult literacy. It recognised from the outset that government alone could not solve this problem and that the path would be long and slow but critical to the state's future and that of many, many individual Tasmanians. The government recognised that the changes in culture would only come through a grassroots movement.

The Government recognised that the changes in culture would only come through a grassroots movement.

The funding provided has allowed a collective approach to be developed. Through this an organic collective of member organisations, communities and businesses has been built, each taking small and varied actions that will have big impacts over time. The appeal is also to individuals to get involved by volunteering time as tutors, mentors and advocates.

The 26TEN Coalition and the 26TEN Team are integral to the collective approach. They connect members, help share stories, raise awareness of services, help member organisations to take action, and support volunteers.

To date the collective has 139 member organisations, 683 supporters and 1333 volunteer tutors. Member organisations are varied from Surf Lifesaving, Metro Tasmania, Break O' Day Council, Ravenswood Neighbourhood House, Tasmanian Aboriginal Legal Service, Houston's to Service Tasmania. As well, 26TEN communities have been established in Circular Head, Burnie, St Helens, Derwent Valley, Glenorchy and Huon Valley.

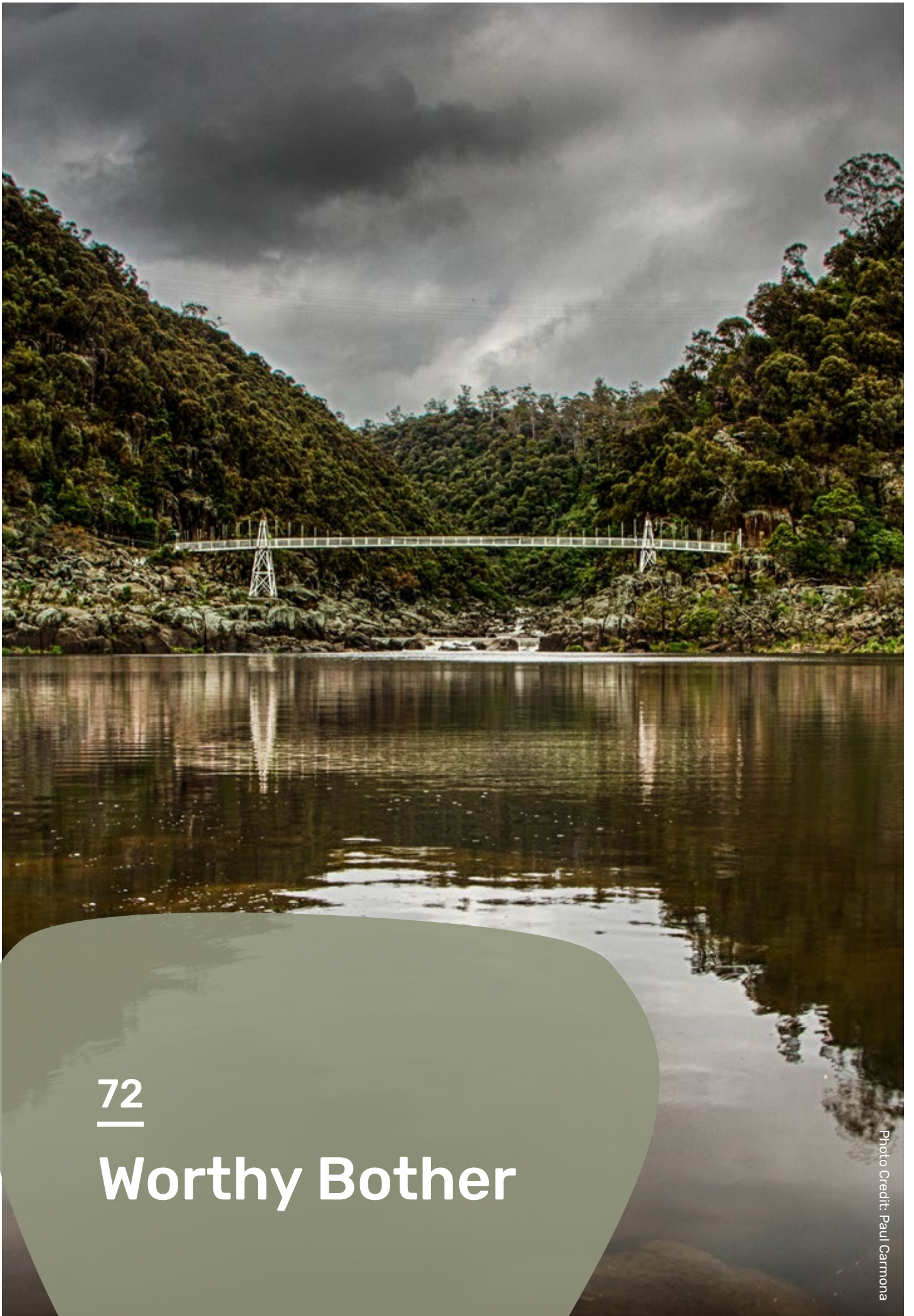
Though our foundations are now established we have much to do to extend the 26TEN network, get the message out further and wider and inspire everyone to get involved.

Through collective action everyone can help to deliver the 26TEN vision: All Tasmanians have the literacy and numeracy skills they need for work and life.



*Something to think about: How can WE accelerate people taking action? How can we increase awareness and action to 'cult or viral' levels?*





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# Worthy Bother



## Worthy Bother

BY STEVE BENTLEY

Steve Bentley worked as a primary school teacher for many years and now works in a high school setting with children who have disengaged from school and who have suffered trauma. Following a Churchill Fellowship in 2014, he has worked to raise awareness of the impacts trauma have on brain development, behaviour resulting from trauma and trauma recovery.

In a recent conversation with a first-year teacher I was asked if the process of teaching became less complex with time. I considered my response carefully and suggested that whilst teaching will always be a busy profession with many demands on teachers' time and energy, being a teacher simply requires you to maintain an unconditional positive regard for the children in your care. Your job as a teacher is to form strong working relationships with the children in your care and to see any errors that they make, be they emotional, social, physical or cognitive, as your opportunity to teach.

I work with children who are disengaged either totally or partially from formal education. I have seen firsthand the challenges faced by students with poor literacy skills who already see themselves as poor students, bad learners and, in most cases, label themselves as bad people. This perception of themselves as bad and worthless is reinforced every time they find themselves in trouble. The challenges facing these children and those trying to reengage them can be significant.

It became clear to me when working with disengaged children that most of them had a background that included trauma. By trauma I refer to the definition provided by Bruce Perry:

A psychologically distressing event that is outside the range of usual human experience, often involving a sense of intense fear, terror and helplessness.

Trauma, particularly in the years from conception to three, when the brain is developing and growing so fast, results in the formation of maladapted thinking processes. Children who have been traumatised overuse the limbic system of their brain (survival brain) rather than relying on their cortex (thinking brain).

For example, if a child has learnt that adults cannot be trusted and are sometimes dangerous, they will potentially see their first day at school as a justifiably terrifying experience.

Increased stress levels activate their limbic system resulting in an inability to learn. They can only disassociate (freeze), run (flight) or fight. Once we have a negative experience that initiates a stress response we tend to avoid that situation occurring again if we can. So it is with these children and literacy.

I believe in Tasmania we have a growing number of children who are struggling with their literacy skills not because schools are not helping them but because their early experiences rob them of their potential. I also believe this number is higher than we think.

Effective intervention to help these vulnerable children regain some of their potential lost to trauma, requires trauma-informed practice, unconditional positive regard for the child, extraordinary patience and luck. We are asking the child to revisit what has been a particularly unpleasant experience for them because of their maladapted view of the world. Forming positive working relationships becomes essential as it provides the child with a chance to once again trust and to take the risk of failing and embarrassing themselves publicly.

I don't know why you bother with me Steve. No one in our family can read, it's like a magic trick we don't know. I just can't do it, I can't make my brain see words. – (Ben, 13)



I was lucky enough to travel to the UK and the USA to study successful trauma recovery centres and two things became clear to me as significant elements of every successful program I saw.

Firstly, each centre was staffed with people who had been trained in the area of trauma recovery. They also were loud advocates encouraging local, state and national bodies to focus on early intervention as a long-term solution for the increasing number of children suffering intergenerational neglect or abuse. They saw the importance of identifying young vulnerable mothers and providing those mothers with the parenting skills absent from their own childhood experience.

Secondly, these organisations recognised the importance of a multidisciplinary approach when supporting these children. The most effective programs like Jasper Mountain in Oregon had excellent communications between and colocation of all support services, education, paediatrics, speech therapy, psychologists, social workers, youth workers and psychiatrists.

Early intervention is perhaps the only way we can break the intergenerational cycle of abuse, neglect and drug addiction that so negatively impact upon the child's potential and leave the education system attempting to mitigate damage already done. Sometimes we have a win. It's what keeps us going.

*'Hey Steve, does that sign say no skating when its wet?'*

*'How did you know that Benny?'*

*'Oh no, not another lecture from you on how good my reading is!'* – (Ben, 15)



***Something to think about: In terms of intergenerational cycles of abuse, neglect and drug use, when do we stop feeling sorry for the child and start blaming the adult?***



A night scene on a beach. In the center, a bright campfire burns on the sand, casting a warm glow. Two people are sitting on chairs or the sand, looking towards the fire. The background features several palm trees silhouetted against a dark, starry sky. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and contemplative.

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## Lessons from the Past



## Lessons from the Past

BY STUART KELLY

Stuart Kelly is Principal of St Paul's Catholic School in Bridgewater. He has twenty-three years' experience in primary education and holds a Master of Educational Leadership with the Australian Catholic University. Stuart commenced his principalship in 2008 following senior leadership roles since 2000.

Tasmania's 'wicked' literacy problem in which 48% of our population doesn't have written language skills at a high enough level to manage the comprehension and self-expression demands of daily life is alarming.

During the last 12 years as a primary school principal I have often reflected upon and compared my own primary school education in the mid-1970s to what we are offering today. My reflections centre around how my small country school successfully educated the children in town for many generations in conditions that today would be seen as substandard.

In the mid 1970s the three staff at my school were under resourced and certainly didn't enjoy the state-of-the-art facilities and technologies, which are the norm in today's educational setting. The dedicated and versatile staff managed large, multi-age classes without the support of teacher assistants, specialist teachers, administrative staff or access to a range of allied health professionals.

But what they did have was the full support of the local community.

It is crucial that students realise that learning at school is a shared experience and something that isn't done in isolation from family or community. Schools need to build trust with the parent community and work in collaboration to ensure learning is meaningful and relevant to students and their families.

Parents and grandparents were not only involved in the daily activities of the school, but they were fully invested and engaged. As young people, we saw our families working in partnership with the school to improve the learning outcomes of all students. The school was able to fully utilise the skill base of the parent community. Parents with business backgrounds assisted in the office, parents who loved reading ran the library, parents with trades used their skills to build and help maintain facilities and grounds.

My own mother volunteered daily during my primary school education. Mum would be found reading to classes in the library, assisting with administrative tasks and supporting the teaching staff. I remember fondly splitting wood with my grandfather after school a couple of days a week, so the classroom open fires could be lit early for the next morning. As parents and our extended families worked collaboratively to improve the educational opportunities of all students, lifelong friendships and connections were formed that remain today.

Even though both my parents didn't enjoy the opportunities I have had with education due to the necessity to support their large extended families, their contributions, assistance and willingness to support the school sent a very clear message that my education was important and valued by the people I respected the most.

I am not that naïve to think that we can return to the 1970s. There have been massive changes in our society and to family structures, not to mention the significant advancements in education and research. What we need to do in education is to rethink and be creative about exciting new ways that we can work in partnership with families to support student learning. The relationship

between schools and families has become very transactional and businesslike. Numerous policies and compliance issues have made it challenging for parents to contribute in traditional ways. Schools need to ‘open the doors’ to families and value their contributions. Schools need to complement the learning that has already happened in the home and recognise and value parents as the first and ongoing educators of their children.

It is crucial that students realise that learning at school is a shared experience and something that isn’t done in isolation from family or community. Schools need to build trust with the parent community and work in collaboration to ensure learning is meaningful and relevant to students and their families.

In 2017 my current school was fortunate enough to be involved in the Families and Schools Together Program (FAST), a voluntary program that targets the whole family. The FAST Program consisted of eight-weekly whole family meetings with structured activities to build social connections and reduce social isolation. The approach is designed to enhance the child’s functioning in school, in the community, and at home. The FAST Program believes that ‘a high level of involvement is a critical protective factor that increases the likelihood of children succeeding in life and in school’.

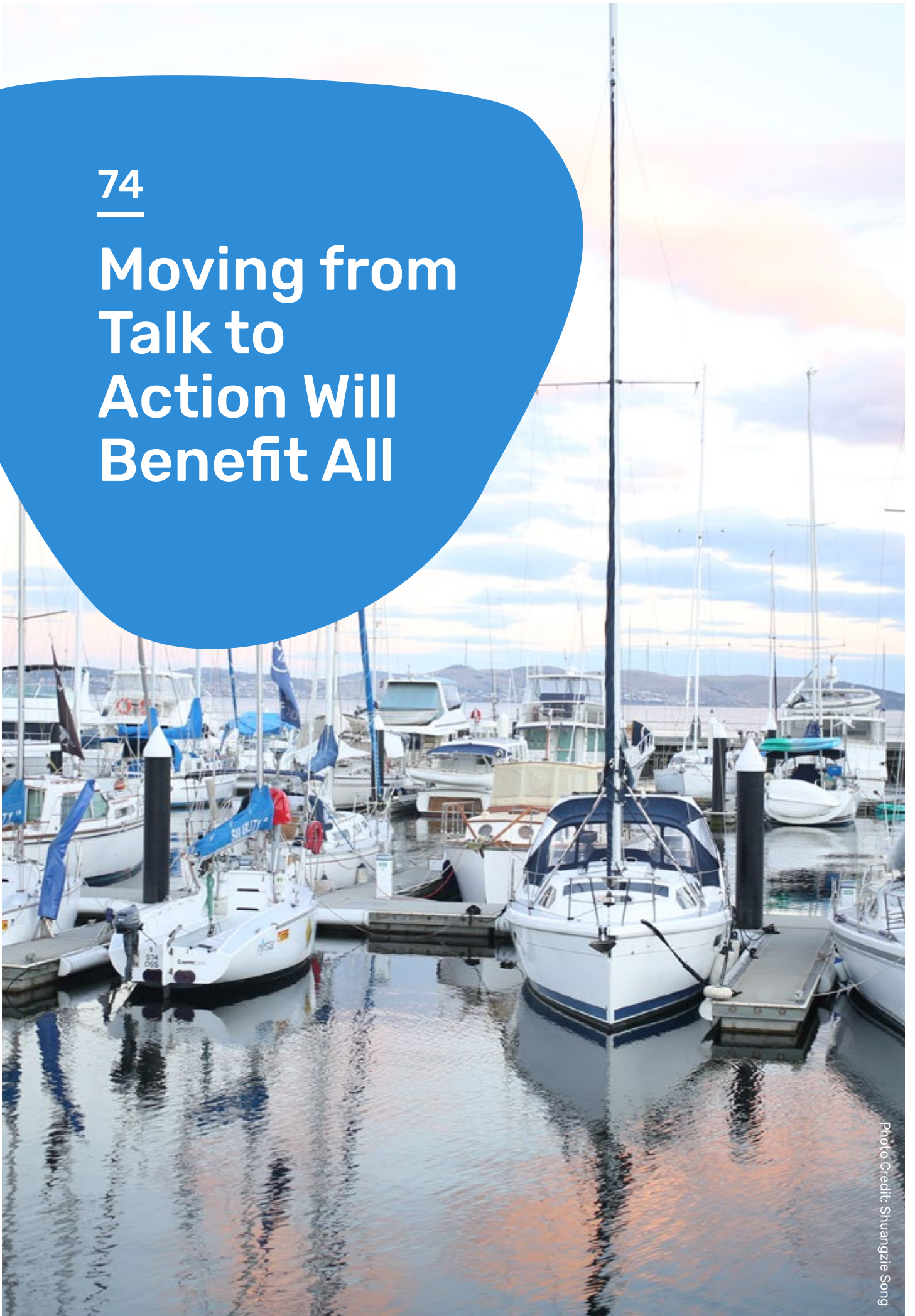
We had many positive outcomes from participating in the FAST Program. The results indicated that, on completion of the program, the school had a high number of statistically significant results. These included an 85% increase in parent-to-school contact, 88% of parents reporting an improvement in their social relationships, and a 32% reduction in difficulties with children’s behaviour at home and school. The FAST Program is an example of how community partnerships can work together to support students, schools and families.

Schools should be tackling Tasmania’s ‘wicked’ literacy problem with vigour and creativity, seeking to reengage parents in the learning of their children through targeted programs and activities that build mutual trust, respect and understanding. Just as my committed and hardworking teachers, with the unwavering support of my parents, ensured my education was a positive experience, today’s educators need to reengage their communities to ensure all students have the opportunity to fulfill their potential whilst being a part of a vibrant and thriving community.



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# Moving from Talk to Action Will Benefit All





## Moving from Talk to Action Will Benefit All

BY SUE COSTELLO

Sue Costello has worked in the government, community and education sectors. She has a history of helping young people and is passionate about the importance of education as an enabler to enriching lives. Returning recently to her birthplace in Hobart, Sue is now managing 26TEN's strategy to improve the adult literacy and numeracy levels of all Tasmanians.

**M**any people find it hard to believe that one in two Tasmanians don't have the reading, writing or maths skills to get by in everyday life. But just like any long-term problem, getting people talking leads to better understanding and eventual action.

Turn your thoughts to recent media campaigns that raise awareness about hidden issues in our society including mental health and domestic violence. Beyond Blue, White Ribbon and Stay ChatTy campaigns come to mind. They are effective. Mental illness, for example, no longer holds the same stigma in our society.

Tasmania's campaign for adult literacy and numeracy in Tasmania, 26TEN is similar to these campaigns. Getting people talking isn't enough. 26TEN seeks to build a society where those with good literacy and numeracy skills help those who don't. Collectively, we must take action. This is when real change happens, benefitting all. 26TEN is developing a network of passionate organisations and individuals all working towards the common goal of lifting the literacy and numeracy levels here in our state.

There is no better cause. The benefits are great for all Tasmanians. Workplaces become more productive. Health outcomes improve. Employment opportunities increase. And children grow up in households where learning and education is valued, tackling that intergenerational poverty cycle. Working together, we lift the resilience and wellbeing of our community.

Governments alone cannot tackle this problem. Everyone needs to help, just like in any campaign. This long-term problem needs to be addressed from a variety of angles. While 26TEN focuses on adults, let's get behind a push to ensure that everyone gets the literacy and numeracy support they need despite their age or circumstance.

It is worth recognising that Tasmania leads the way in tackling literacy and numeracy with its use of this approach compared with other Australian states. Consecutive Tasmanian governments and our political parties have all recognised this. So let's all get behind this campaign as it is unacceptable to do nothing about that statistic.



*Something to think about: How do we start the conversation so that people get the help they need?*



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# The Future Tasmanians Deserve





# The Future Tasmanians Deserve

BY SUSAN PARR

Susan Parr is the chair of the Tasmanian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (TCCI). She is a proud and passionate Tasmanian who has a lifetime interest in the importance of reading and education. Her vision is for every Tasmanian to have a rich education, meaningful work, robust health and to live in a safe environment.

**E**ducation is the key to Tasmania's future ... economic, social, environmental ... all aspects of our lives. Clearly, we recognise that we must increase the literacy and numeracy of all Tasmanian children for their future prosperity. We must give them the abilities to work and earn income in what is increasingly becoming a more prosperous Tasmania. And while there is criticism of tests like NAPLAN, at least we are able to measure ourselves as a state against the others.

But it's not just our children ... there are so many people in our communities who live and work without the skills so many of us are blessed to take for granted.

Many years ago, I was a voluntary literacy tutor. I remember working with a young Tasmanian woman who wanted to learn how to read to her child. She was illiterate and knew it, and she suspected she was suffering financial abuse by having to get someone to help with bank deposit and withdrawal forms. We began by learning to cook together and she gained confidence and learned how to read.

As I noted, with sadness, in the 2017 Tasmania Report, Tasmanians are the unhealthiest, oldest, worst educated, most under-employed and most dependent on government benefits in Australia.

But I know through members of the TCCI that illiteracy continues among many trusted staff ... they are fine doing manual work, or transport work, but when they have to fill out forms for risk assessment of asset replacement, they struggle ... even to the point of leaving work.

The TCCI is on the record of supporting the State Government's policy of extending all of Tasmania's high schools to Grade 11 and 12. The reality is that Tasmania is a very decentralised state. If the choice is going to one of the major cities to attend college or leaving school, in past years many young people have chosen the latter. But now, they are staying at school with their friends. The more young people who finish Grade 12, the better for our state. And then, with their friends, when they're 18, they can go on to higher education, whether that be taking VET courses in TAFE or attending the University of Tasmania.

As I noted, with sadness, in the 2017 Tasmania Report, Tasmanians are the unhealthiest, oldest, worst educated, most under-employed and most dependent on government benefits in Australia. This is not sustainable, and if it continues will condemn a large number of Tasmanians to unproductive lives with compromised opportunities for employment, personal fulfilment and community engagement. The flow-on effects mean increasing health costs, more people who feel alienated from society, and who, in turn, have no stake in developing communities.

The Tasmania Report has become a benchmark for Tasmania, with one of Australia's most respected economists, Saul Eslake, providing analysis.

We also have a unique partnership for the Report, coordinated by the TCCI with partner TasCOSS, the Bank of Us, Chartered Accountants Australia and New Zealand, the Federal Group, Southern Cross Television and *The Mercury* newspaper. Gratifyingly, organisations such as Tasplan Super are now using the Tasmania Report in their planning.

The significance of economic indicators alone can cloud vision and judgment. The juxtaposition of social and economic indicators informs a fuller appreciation and prompts debate about the priorities that Tasmania must set.

Of course, the State Government plays a huge part in the achievement of community priorities, but local government, health and educational institutions, industry, businesses, community groups, households and individuals have a responsibility to look beyond self-interest and professional empires, and understand and act for the needs of Tasmania as a whole.

Traditionally, business has not examined the qualitative indicators of Tasmania's success, such as housing, education and health. The TCCI believes that the true measure of a successful Tasmania must include improved achievements in these areas as well as the quantitative indicators of employment, infrastructure development, levels of taxation and the costs of doing business in an island state with a static population and limited transport options.

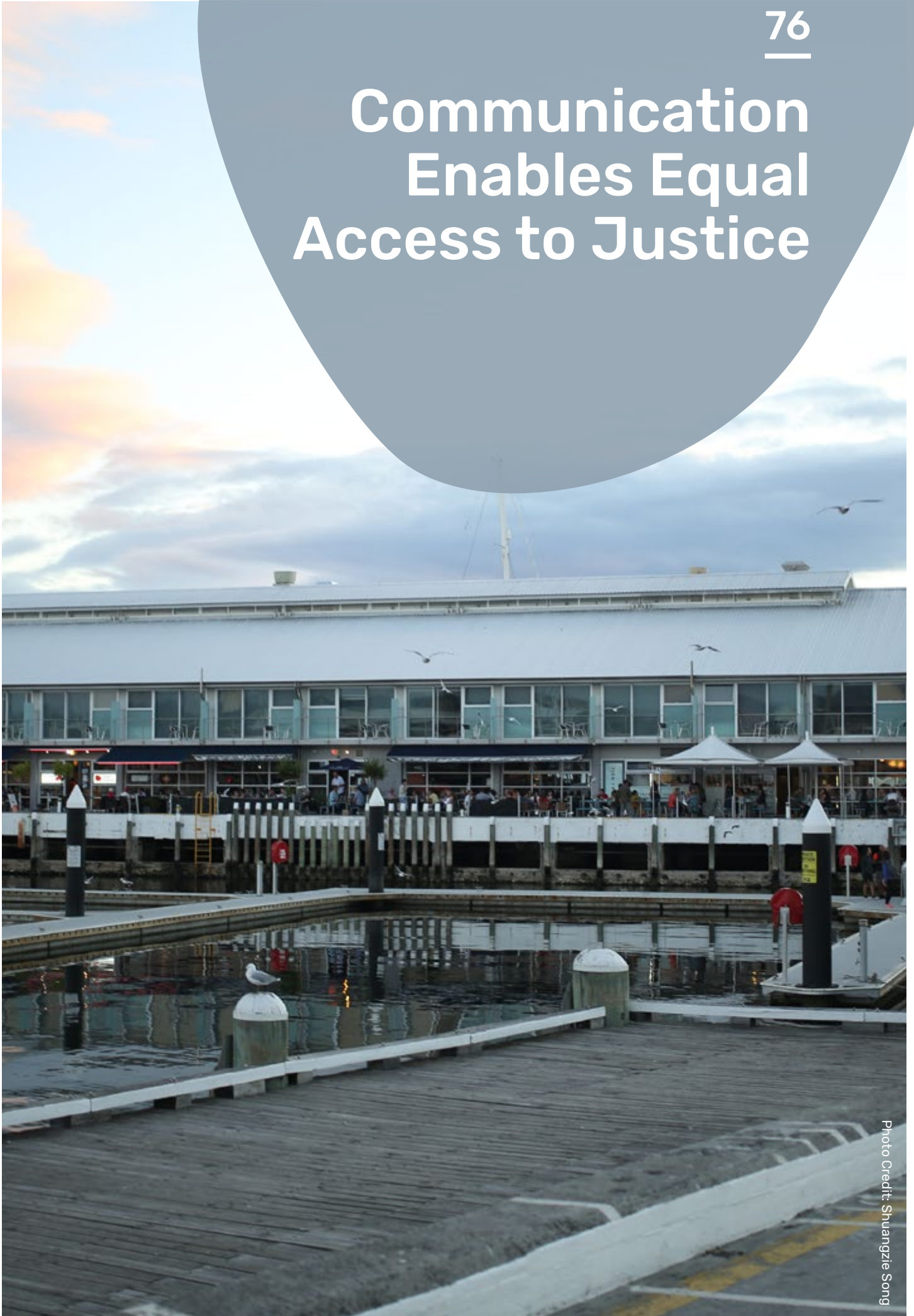
This will require leaders with courage, vision and valour to see beyond political horizons to deliver policies that avoid the future as described by the Productivity Commission. Mediocrity is not the future Tasmanians deserve.

And the TCCI believes passionately that the way to overcome this for Tasmanians begins with our children ... learning to be literate and numerate with confidence.



*Something to think about: How can I improve the understanding in my community that literacy is the key to individual self-determination?*

# Communication Enables Equal Access to Justice







## Communication Enables Equal Access to Justice

BY PROFESSOR TERESE HENNING & RIKKI MAWAD

Professor Terese Henning is the Director of the Tasmania Law Reform Institute (TLRI) and one of Australia's foremost experts on evidence law. Rikki Mawad is Assistant Director at TLRI.

**T**he ability of people to communicate effectively with police, with lawyers and in court will fundamentally determine whether they gain access to justice *and whether justice can in fact be done*.

While we would like to believe that our justice system is universally accessible, people with communication needs arising from age, disability, trauma, development or language and literacy continue to face significant barriers to participating in justice processes. From first contact with police or justice agencies to seeking advice from lawyers through to testifying in court, the justice system is based on the ability of an individual to give a competent, reliable, oral account of their story and to understand what is happening.

In a system that is challenging even for skilled communicators, the barriers faced by young children, by a person with an intellectual disability, someone with an acquired brain injury or someone experiencing speech, learning and language difficulties are even greater.

The ability to communicate is critical to a complaint being investigated, a witness giving key evidence and a suspect or accused person understanding the charges against them and telling their story. Often this perceived *inability* of a

Yet while the law, policy and practice are slowly changing, the ability to communicate remains the heart of access to justice.

person with communication needs to be a ‘reliable witness’ or to ‘withstand the rigours’ of a trial has meant people with communication needs who have been the victim of a crime may not have their case prosecuted and those who are suspected of or accused of a crime may not receive a fair trial.

Excluding people who aren’t considered able to ‘communicate’ the way the system requires them to means that people with communication needs can be open to predation by perpetrators who know that they won’t be able to ‘tell’ police, lawyers and the courts what happened or that they would not be believed. On the other hand, suspects and people with communication needs accused of a crime may not understand or be able to provide an explanation to police and lawyers, denying them the ability to receive a fair trial. These systemic barriers to universal communication have in part also led to the criminalisation of disability and the overrepresentation of people with communication needs in prison systems that are ill-equipped to support them.

Established conventions in legal practice also exclude people with communication needs from equal access to justice and can lead to increased trauma and re-victimisation. The antiquated notions that children tell lies or that people with intellectual disabilities aren’t capable of giving reliable evidence are slowly being challenged alongside the practice of shredding witnesses over days in cross-examination. Yet while the law, policy and practice are slowly changing, the ability to communicate remains the heart of access to justice.

Acknowledging the importance of communication, reforms such as those recommended by the Tasmania Law Reform Institute’s Final Report No. 23 such as the introduction of an intermediary/communication assistant scheme are the key pillars to building a universally accessible system.

The Institute recommends that communication expert/intermediaries be used within the criminal justice system to assist victims, witnesses and defendants to communicate with police, lawyers and the courts. These communication experts aren't advocates; they act as independent quasi-translators for people with communication needs in their interactions with the justice system. These experts can also provide advice to police, lawyers and judges about how to tailor interactions to ensure proceedings and questions match a person's communication needs.

The Institute recommends using communication assistants/intermediaries as part of a package that includes police investigative interviewing that is adapted to the communication needs of interviewees, the use of pre-trial directions hearings and the pre-trial pre-recording of evidence.

When used effectively, the Institute reports that a best-practice package of communication measures not only improves access to justice for people with communication needs, it can reduce trial times, particularly the length of cross-examination. In England and Wales for example, where intermediaries have been used for over two decades, experiences show that when used in conjunction with pre-trial directions hearings and pre-recording, the average cross-examination times have been reduced from hours or sometimes even days to 15–20 minutes.

The Institute's report and recommendations were given to the Tasmanian Government in December 2017 and are consistent with those measures outlined in Tasmania's Disability Justice Plan and the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

The Institute welcomes renewed emphasis on measures to improve access to justice for people with communication needs as part of this symposium.



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# Autism and Literacy: A Neglected Area For Our Children?







## Autism and Literacy: A Neglected Area For Our Children?

BY TESS MOODIE

Tess Moodie lives in the far north west of Tasmania, and both she and her daughter are on the Autism Spectrum. Her life experience and professional background in social services have sparked a passion for social justice and advocacy for those living with diversity, and most recently the unique profile and challenges of females on the Autism Spectrum and people living with disability.

I am a late-diagnosed female on the Autism Spectrum (ASD) (Aspergers). I identify as an Aspie 2e, which means I live with a disability, as well as being gifted intellectually (IQ165). I also have a genetic disorder called Ehlers Danlos Syndrome (Hypermobility). Despite this, throughout my life, reading and literacy has never been a challenge for me. My mother taught me to read at a young age and I could read fluently around the age of four, before I commenced kindergarten. I am now using this strength to write and raise awareness about autism, specifically females on the Autism Spectrum, whilst recently being appointed to the Board of Autism Tasmania to further contribute to the autistic community and voice in Tasmania.

From the literature, it is clear that research on the development of emergent literacy skills of children on the Autism Spectrum is insufficient. Future research with a focus on fostering emergent-literacy development in early childhood programs is required.

Unfortunately, this is not the case for all autistic people. I do not profess to be an expert in literacy or education for children on the Autism Spectrum, but having a seven-year-old daughter who was also diagnosed last year has thrown me into a learning curve on the challenges (but also the gifts) of autistic children.

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects social interaction and communication, and may cause restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities. It is called a 'spectrum' because the range and severity of the challenges can vary. Whilst there is a focus on therapeutic interventions for social communication and interaction for autistic people, development of literacy can also be neglected.

Between 30–60% of school children with autism have challenges with literacy. Generally, the struggles with emergent literacy skills include dyslexia (poor word recognition), poor comprehension (understanding or making meaning of what they read), and poor narrative ability. Children on the Autism Spectrum often have delays in language development, and the development of literary skills is often accompanied by poor language development.

A significant number of children with autism (approximately three-quarters) also have sensory processing challenges. They experience problems with integrating sensory input in their environment, which affects concentration, focus, the ability to sit still for extended periods and may result in meltdowns. Poor sensory integration often triggers an anxiety response. Poor sensory integration also affects executive function which includes the ability to plan

and carry out a task, working memory, and asking for help. Sensory processing challenges are a nightmare for a child trying to learn in a noisy, busy, constantly changing school environment. Comorbid mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression are reported at high rates (71%) of young adults and may also affect their school attendance, emotional regulation and engagement in learning.

Motor skills can be affected, making it painful to hold a pen properly. Writing is often rushed or messy, and hands can tire easily from the extra effort required to produce written work. Children may develop an aversion to using pencil/pen and paper in learning. Some research suggests the use of information technology (computers, iPads, tablets) may be an effective way for autistic children to learn by providing visual tools for learning. It also reduces the need to use pencils/pens for extended periods.

From the literature, it is clear that research on the development of emergent literacy skills of children on the Autism Spectrum is insufficient. Future research with a focus on fostering emergent-literacy development in early childhood programs is required. Also, the importance of encouraging reading at home from an early age to promote literacy development should not be ignored.

At university level, undergraduate degrees in education may only cover the basics of ASD or learning difficulties, and postgraduate studies are recommended for a teacher/educator to specialise in teaching children with autism. Given the increasing number of children being diagnosed with autism each year, it would appear prudent to review the undergraduate curriculum to include more extensive content to equip teachers with the specialised skills required to support learning for autistic children. For already practising teachers/early childhood educators, it is vital for them to be fully informed in the unique challenges and learning profiles of children with autism, and to participate in professional development regularly to keep their skills up to date with the changing evidence base and discourse.

A repetitive theme I hear from talking with parents of children with autism is that the education system doesn't always have sufficient resources, funding, staff and tools to adequately meet the needs of the autistic learner. At the operational level, it is imperative that children on the Autism Spectrum have a learning plan implemented in the school environment to identify

and accommodate individually identified learning difficulties. As part of the learning plan process, it is helpful for an occupational therapist or psychologist to be consulted to identify any sensory processing issues that may be impacting learning across all areas.

Without adequate education and recognition of the literacy challenges for an autistic child, they may not receive appropriate or individualised support to address literacy challenges. This may result in lifelong challenges as an adult in education, employment, justice, autonomy, health and wellness, the ability to advocate for themselves and self-actualise across their life course. As other research has shown, early intervention will always be crucial for optimal outcomes in literacy for people on the Autism Spectrum.

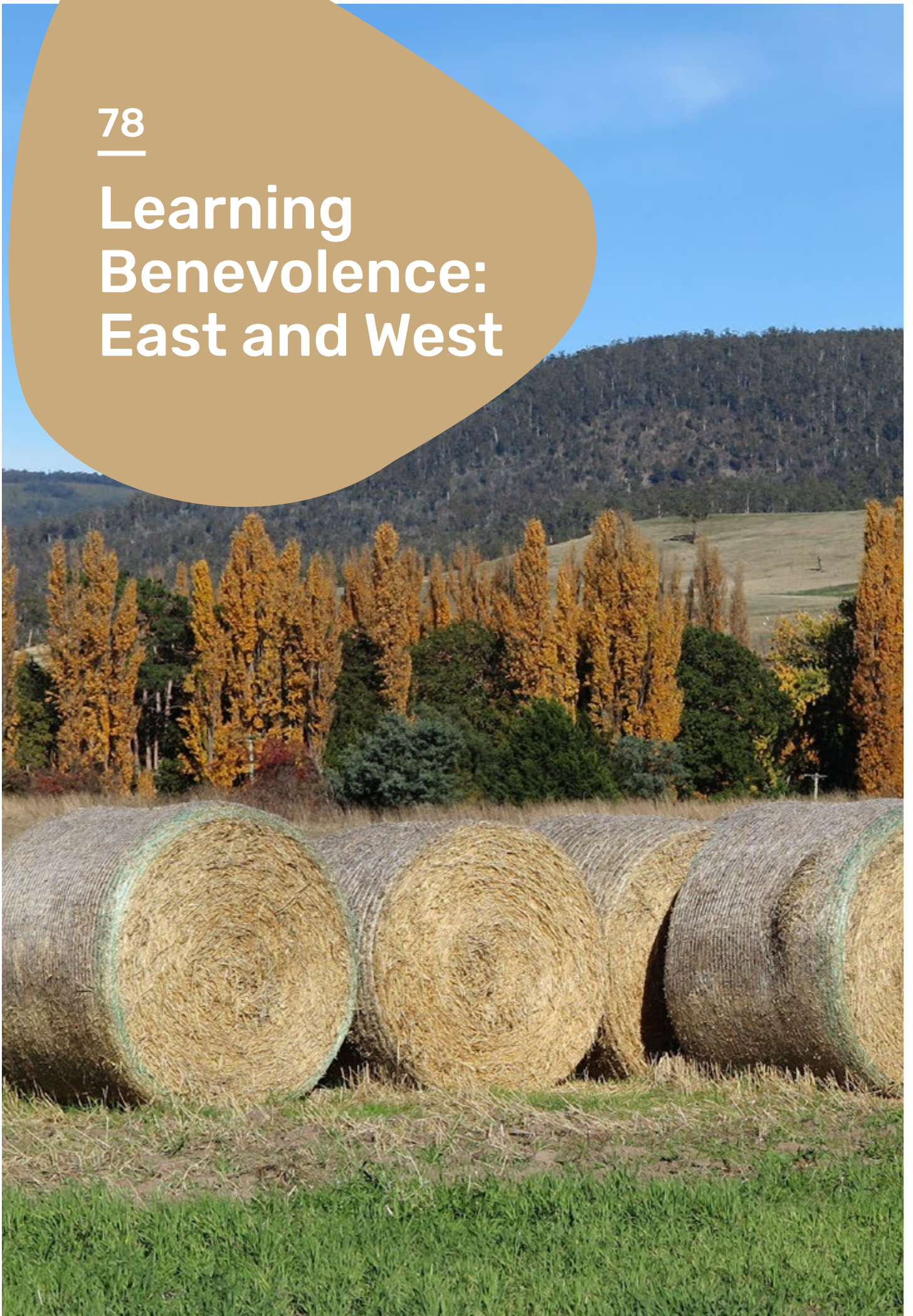


*Something to think about: What else do you think would support your child on the Autism Spectrum to develop/improve their literacy skills at school or at home?*



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# Learning Benevolence: East and West





## Learning Benevolence: East and West

BY DR TONY TAI

Dr Tony Tai was educated in the East and the West. He is a dental professional with many years' experience and is interested in working with people to bring good results in any areas of endeavour. Tony has interest in Buddhism and has many friends of other religions. He has lived in Australia for more than two decades.

One day in the middle of last year I was thinking of joining a book club in Hobart. I couldn't believe it! For the next three months, every class was fully enrolled, and I could not get a place.

This suggested to me that we have a large community that loves reading and is of high literacy. While this is so heartening (though not for me who wanted to join the club) – is this true across the whole of Tasmania? I have heard that the standard of literacy is not so high across Tasmania, and in other places.

I will share some insights about learning that I have witnessed.

A lady who teaches in a rural state high school told me that one day a student in her class was busy with his mobile phone instead of listening to her. She went around and showed a theatrical face to him. She has received more attention in the class since. She also told me that teaching in public schools has taken a very demanding and challenging turn. Gone are the days where teaching and learning focuses on the teacher at the front with reading, writing and reciting. Students today have ownership of their learning and teachers are facilitators and provide students with a choice of whatever platforms they wish to learn



I have found that if one is humble and has a high expectation of the audience or the people one is dealing with, they generally respond well.

from. They can use digital methods as well as choose the venue in which they do their work. As a result, when they feel they are comfortable and respected, they are more likely to pay respect to their teachers and learn.

My daughter had a problem with her maths in primary school. She was encouraged to think it through and try to understand. Later she came and told me how she had worked it all out for herself. I listened intently and congratulated her for her endeavour. She has had no problems since.

A young chef once attended a public speaking course that I was involved with. At the first session he could hardly speak in front of a class of twenty. By the eighth session, he was speaking so eloquently that I told him he could run for public office. All class members encouraged, supported and showed genuine interest in him. He listened to talks by other class members and read books given to him. His progress was impressive.

About six years ago I was hosting a performance in Launceston. I said, 'I have heard that Launceston people are hospitable, friendly and good sports. We are so honoured, privileged and humbled to perform for all our friends here.' I had one of the most rapturous receptions that I had ever received.

From my experience I have found that if one is humble and has a high expectation of the audience or the people one is dealing with, they generally respond well. Literacy springs from whether one is willing to learn, read, and use what is learnt. It is a huge challenge to teachers, in whatever institution, to encourage their students to learn. However this is how a high standard of literacy in society is achieved.

A charming Australian lady recently told me that she has come back to teaching in a Tasmanian public school after teaching in Hong Kong. She said that she

is paid less and works less. She is missing her former students who are still texting and pleading with her to return. She said the students there are eager learners. She has found her new job challenging because she has found the students are less willing to learn and work.

There is a different attitude towards learning in the West and the East and she is experiencing this. In the West there is more lateral learning and free thinking. This easily relates to knowledge that is learned and there is more flexibility in applying this knowledge. Whereas in the East, there is more scholastic respect but more rote learning and the application of knowledge may not be as good.

I think there are citizens with low-literacy in Tasmania and elsewhere who have not learned for many reasons. But learning to read can generally be a pleasure. Whilst it is difficult to begin with, once the mind is tuned in, progress can be rapid, satisfying and very rewarding.

In conclusion, I am of the opinion that to help raise literacy and thereby communicate effectively in society, one has to be benevolent, compassionate, caring, prepared to reinvent oneself and selfless as the Great Holy Buddha said. By working together and by going one step further to understand our fellow human beings, the community as a whole is very likely to reap many benefits.



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# Collaboration to Harvest Collective Wisdom





## Collaboration to Harvest Collective Wisdom

BY WENDY QUINN

Wendy Quinn was a member of the Tasmanian Government senior executive service from 1999 to 2011 leading and managing statewide services such as mental health, disability, aged care and rehabilitation services. She currently coordinates the Master of Leadership at the University of Tasmania and runs a consultancy in guiding transformational journeys.

**D**uring a long career in the Department of Health and Human Services I had the privilege of experiencing the astonishing power of collective wisdom arising from authentic collaboration.

For around five years, early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, my job involved managing a set of complex service areas including Mental Health, Correctional Health, Disability and Alcohol and Drug Services. Management of a new unit was added in the form of the Complex and Exceptional Needs Unit (CEN). This included implementing the new Agency Collaboration Strategy. The unit was resourced with a small number of people to support the function of the strategy across the very large Department of Health and Human Services including engagement of other key government agencies involved with complex clients such as the Education Department, Police, Department of Justice and Corrective Services.

The Collaboration Strategy operated for a period of over five years and achieved some amazing results, finding real and lasting solutions for situations that were previously deemed to be unsolvable.

The genesis of the strategy arose from the then Minister for Health and Human Services (The Hon Judy Jackson) who was dismayed that her department could not solve the needs of the most complex clients. The group of people whose needs did not fit neatly into any one service system were repeatedly sent elsewhere and often ended up with no service at all or very costly services that did not address real needs. An example of this complexity is a homeless teenage child with a mild intellectual disability, comorbid with substance abuse, not attending school and in contact with police and juvenile justice for lighting fires.

The Collaboration Strategy operated for a period of over five years and achieved some amazing results, finding real and lasting solutions for situations that were previously deemed to be unsolvable.

It was underpinned by the vision that collaboration is about people working together to achieve the best outcomes for clients. There was no official additional budget for service delivery allocation. Success relied instead on tangible support from the highest levels of leadership, a small group of enthusiastic, skilled facilitators employed within CEN, and some carefully developed and well-articulated processes and documentation working at three different levels. Firstly at service delivery level within all services across the department utilising the vision and principles to support working together and intervening early to creatively determine solutions for clients with complex issues and their families. Secondly, intervening with more complex cases with the assistance of key coordinators. Key coordinators were about 100 designated middle and senior managers/clinicians spread across the service system. They were given the additional title and coopted as part of the Collaboration Strategy. CEN provided them with ongoing leadership training and support.

The third and highest level of intervention involved the most senior directors/managers of service areas including hospitals, mental health, housing, child protection, etcetera, meeting together as required to form a Board for Exceptional Needs (BEN) to pool resources and collective wisdom aimed at finding solutions for the most complex exceptional and even catastrophic cases. Senior people from other government agencies and non-government organisations were invited to attend BEN meetings as required. In effect, these meetings operated as very high-level case conferences. In line with Alan Briskin's work on harvesting collective wisdom, they were underpinned with collaborative dialogue techniques including deep listening, suspension of certainty, seeing whole systems and seeking diverse perspectives, respect for others and group discernment in tandem with welcoming all that arises, and retaining a sense of humour despite the seriousness of situations.

The Agency Strategy was underpinned by five principles that were expressed in plain English and disseminated widely via every means possible. This included posters that mysteriously appeared in every meeting room in the department and small business-card summaries with liberal use of easily identified artwork.

The five principles were:

1. Work together in a spirit of cooperation: This meant everyone staying engaged with the process and the conversations until there were solutions, no matter how long it took, not walking away, contributing time, energy and resources when needed.
2. Intervene as early as possible: Not waiting until a small issue became an inevitably larger one, and looking for system solutions that address root causes.
3. Keep the client and their world at the centre: Maintaining a practical, solution-finding, creative problem-solving approach even if it meant that a few rules needed to be broken and rigid service systems bent.
4. Find solutions that are fair, creative and affordable: Applying an ethical and imaginative filter and wherever possible working with available resources
5. Design understandable processes: Coming up with solutions that make sense to everyone using language that everyone can understand.



The ongoing operation of CEN and the Collaboration Strategy fell victim to organisational restructure and changes in government direction. These collaborative methods and principles could, however, be easily transferable to the issue of addressing literacy in Tasmania.



*Something to think about: How could we adapt this sort of collaboration to improving literacy in Tasmania? Why do we abandon things that are working? How do we stop that happening in the life of governments, departments, organisations and communities? Why do we have to reinvent so many wheels?*

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# First Steps to New Adventures





# First Steps to New Adventures

BY TODD SCULTHORPE

Todd Sculthorpe is a descendant of Fanny Cochrane-Smith and studied at the University of Tasmania. He has been committed to education and training for the past twelve years and has a clear focus and determination to close the gap in educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Tasmania.

‘Call me Ishmael’ – three words that have stuck with me from a young age when I was first introduced to Herman Melville’s timeless classic *Moby Dick*. As a young Tasmanian Aboriginal boy growing up in a Tasmanian town whose population struggled to hit a hundred and fifty people, access to literature was a must to whittle away the time. The journeys and adventures that I could bring home in my library bag were my saving grace.

But it wasn’t always so.

As a child I was ‘difficult’, to put it politely. One particular teacher and I clashed almost every day. I was that kid who teachers dread to have in their class; I was angry and frustrated because I felt like I was being picked on, and when I struggled with my reading and writing exercises I was brought to the front of the class.

Isolated, embarrassed and, in retrospect, afraid, I acted out further. It has only been in recent years that my parents and I have talked about this time in my life and I have heard their side of the story. They asked the teacher (so they tell

Like Ishmael on the *Pequod* I had to ride the waves, weather the storms and now have a chance to recount (some of) the journey.

me) ‘do you *know* our son?’ The fact I was Aboriginal did not play a part in my literacy barriers; the challenge was that I was not stimulated and the lessons being taught did not hit the mark for me to excel as an individual learner.

What does this have to do with *Moby Dick*? In the following year I had a new teacher, Mr Marty Ogle. He saw my thirst for adventure and introduced me to Ishmael and Captain Ahab. Now, in fairness, this was an abridged version for primary school students but once my journey on the *Pequod* was over I journeyed *20 000 Leagues Under the Sea* with Captain Nemo on the *Nautilus*, I went on a grand adventure with Tolkien and Bilbo Baggins in *The Hobbit* and discovered the mythical feats of Heracles and other Greek heroes. These adventures are a part of me now and have shaped my current life.

I’ve since travelled on tall ships (harpoons not included), seen tropical reefs and a myriad of aquatic life on and under the water. I’ve embarked on grand adventures and had the privilege to share these with my beautiful wife and now our son. I’ve studied the ancient Greek and Roman empires and discovered Homer’s epics along the way. With each step forward in my life, literacy has propelled me to greater achievements, most notably being the first in my family to graduate from university.

This could not have been achieved without the fundamental basics I learnt in primary school. These are experiences and adventures I would not have been able to achieve without my parents and my teachers. Like Ishmael on the *Pequod* I had to ride the waves, weather the storms and now have a chance to recount (some of) the journey. To get to the heart of the matter though, which unfortunately is not a review of some of the classics that I have read, is to consider what defined this change within me. I’d love to say that it was purely the eloquence of the authors’ abilities to transport me into the world of their characters and the editors who were able to simplify the text for a younger audience. But I have reread these stories as an adult and still get hooked.



The single point in my life that this change within myself comes down to – to accept, to embrace and to learn – I can only comprehend as being that moment when Mr Ogle took the time to know me and was able to make a real connection. He cared for the lessons he was teaching, but more importantly he cared for me and the future I would have with a strong literacy foundation. He nurtured my imagination and encouraged it to grow.

All teachers share this passion but sometimes struggle with making the connection with students. We ask so much of teachers in this day and age and often forget that they are more than their profession. They are people first and foremost and if we want them to connect with our children we need to make a connection with them.

Parental/guardian involvement within a child's schooling also plays a major part in assisting teachers as much as assisting the child with developing literacy skills – to take the time, that as parents we may not necessarily have, to read to our child/children, to engage and enquire about their learning and interests. Because that is the information that can be shared with teachers to help them get to know our sons and daughters, tailor an individual and focused approach to their learning, and start them on the first steps to new adventures.

